



## Celibacy



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# Saint Meinrad Pastoral Studies Series

VERY REV. DENIS ROBINSON, OSB

For 150 years, Saint Meinrad has striven to provide the highest quality education and formation for priests, permanent deacons and lay ministers for the life of the Church. This work has gone on because Saint Meinrad has always been convinced that the Church deserves the brightest, holiest and most ardent ministers for service to God's people.

Today more than ever, in a rapidly changing and expanding Church environment, the work of formation needs to find new and creative ways of raising up these ministers. The Saint Meinrad Pastoral Studies Series is intended to provide creative responses to critical pastoral issues in the life of today's Church.

The series features articles and reflections by Saint Meinrad faculty, staff and visiting lecturers on topics that touch the very heart of the Church's work in the 21st century. The series aims to reach those who are laboring diligently in these same ministries. Through these pages, we hope to provide some stimulus for critical thinking on important issues, as well as a source of intellectual and spiritual renewal for those dedicated to parish and diocesan life.

# Introduction

VERY REV. DENIS ROBINSON, OSB

Celibacy is, of course, a topic of great concern for the Church today. Everywhere in the media, the Church's traditional charism of celibacy for priests has come under harsh scrutiny. The value of celibacy has been seriously questioned by those inside and outside the Church. Celibacy has been indicted as the cause of a range of ills, from sexual abuse to the lack of respect for the role of women. Even within the Church, the value of celibacy has been questioned.

What is the cause of this speculation? Undoubtedly, a partial cause must be seen as a change in attitudes in the greater sphere of society and the social order. Radical new perspectives on human sexuality, the rise of the individual, new and more personalized notions of "happiness," revised ideas about marriage, and the relativization of truth and values must be seen as part of the matrix of realities that have lent themselves to a more negative, critical approach to the Church's ancient tradition.

These new perspectives and new ideas present particular challenges in forming men for celibate commitment today, even as we witness a greater urgency to assure that this formation is solid and secure. Regardless of the nature of their spiritual vocation to the priesthood, candidates for Holy Orders today are very much products of their time and their social situation. Sometimes overtly and often covertly, the values of the social order are ingrained in the human person from childhood.

Attitudes about sexuality, the ready availability of pornography, attitudes toward women, ideas about personal fulfillment and the supposed assurance of individual happiness play a role in the formation of values brought by young men to the work of priestly formation today. Long-held ideas and ideals have to be challenged and redirected for a greater evangelical purpose. Practicing a



celibate life today and preparing for that life can often seem like an uphill struggle, a Sisyphean task, and yet it can be accomplished.

In recent years, Saint Meinrad has spent a great deal of time and creative energy on rethinking our approach to the formation of a celibate way of life for our priesthood candidates. Taking into account their previous ways of life and dispositions, we have striven to create a more comprehensive approach to human and celibate formation through a new program, “Together in One Place.”

This program seeks to reconsider the formation of celibacy in a larger context than the focus on individual expressions of sexuality, which was often a feature of earlier formation programs. “Together in One Place” puts the practice of celibacy squarely where it belongs: in the public sphere of the Church’s life. The successful practice of celibacy in the world today means that celibacy must be considered within a larger context, a human context, a new cultural context, a spiritual context and a pastoral context.

For example, celibacy as a viable way of life is not possible without challenging the cultural context in which modern man finds himself. Unless the candidate for Holy Orders redirects his cultural interests away from the highly sexualized and individualized expressions of so-called popular culture, he is unlikely to find an amicable ground for the cultivation of a celibate way of life.

Celibate formation today must consider the larger context of human relationships in a world where those relationships are often hampered by an overweening individualism and isolationism. Celibate formation today must consider the greater spiritual goals of the individual in a world of highly materialistic values. In short, celibacy formation is complex and critical to the life of the Church.

The articles in this volume are not intended as a systematic treatment or an apologetic for celibacy in the Church today. They are merely presented as stimuli for reflection on an important topic for the life of the Church. The articles present a variety of perspectives on the question of celibacy, all of which are intent upon shoring up the Church’s traditional practice and showing new and

creative ways of realizing the value of celibacy in a world in which this critical charism is frequently under intense scrutiny.

At Saint Meinrad, our goal is to provide priests who are able to live happy, holy and holistic celibate lives. This can only be accomplished if we continually rethink our approaches to celibacy and the many threats to the celibate vocation today. Hopefully, this book will assist in raising further issues for discussion and growth in celibate commitment.

Very Reverend Denis Robinson, OSB  
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# I. Celibacy Across the Lifespan

REV. RAYMOND STUDZINSKI, OSB

When you are asked to write on a topic such as this one, I suppose most people would find themselves wondering, as I did, what it is that readers might expect to learn. My own conclusion was that we would all like to hear that celibacy gets easier, that any sort of struggle comes to an end. Then I was reminded of a story from the Desert Tradition of early monasticism. In the story, a young disciple comes to his desert elder and says: ‘Rejoice with me, for all struggles have ended.’ The desert elder takes a moment and then responds: “Pray that struggles will return for there is no life without struggle.”<sup>1</sup>

The desert elder, I suppose, would say the same thing to us today. Yes, the struggles will always be there even though the dimensions of them may vary. In what follows, I hope to say a few things that might highlight what the terrain of celibacy might look like as we move through the lifespan, as well as what we can put in place now that might help us as we face present and future struggles.

As you are well aware, there are many different approaches that one can take in addressing celibacy. There is a fascinating exchange in a novel by Mary Doria Russell called *The Sparrow* where a hostess, making conversation, asks her Jesuit priest guest: “What’s celibacy like?” To which he replies: “It’s a bitch.”<sup>2</sup> So that would be one

1. *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*, trans. Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1960), 56-7.
2. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008), 37.

approach. We could also approach it as an obligation, a disciplinary requirement for priesthood in the Western Church, and review how that came about. We could also talk about celibacy as a charism, a gift from God which not everyone has.

Or we could talk about it as a practice and pay attention to how it is lived out at various moments in people's lives. It is this last approach that I intend to follow here. I also intend to underscore how celibacy as a practice interconnects with many other practices that all come together to facilitate the spiritual transformation we are after. But first let me say just a few words about spiritual practices that are gaining an increasing amount of attention these days.

### **Nature of Spiritual Practices**

We are all familiar with the saying: "Practice makes perfect." Well, do celibacy and other practices make us perfect? If not, what do they do? One thing they do is illustrated by a story about the practice of archery. In *Zen and the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel, a German philosopher, talks about his experience of learning Zen while serving as a visiting professor for six years at the University of Tokyo.<sup>3</sup> Zen practitioners seek enlightenment through various practices and learn Zen in the context of engaging in some art such as flower arranging or, in Herrigel's case, archery.

These arts in Zen function as religious rituals, spiritual exercises, in which the goal is nothing external, but rather an inner change in the practitioner. Shortly after his arrival in Japan, Herrigel went to a Zen master who proceeded to train him in archery. Day after day, he would practice pulling back the string on the bow, trying to find just the right moment to let go. But even after some years of practice, the master would always say that it still wasn't right.

Frustrated, Herrigel tried to master the technique by using his head, sensing there was a rational approach to how to do it right.

3. Translated by R.F.C. Hull (New York: Random House, 1983).

Indeed, this seemed to him to bring the needed result. But the master sensed immediately that Herrigel was cheating, not playing by the rules, and was ready to end the teaching relationship. Herrigel prevailed on him, and the training sessions went on. One day, the master tells Herrigel, still struggling because *he* wants to shoot the arrow just right, “It shoots.”<sup>4</sup> When Herrigel finally surrenders control and lets “it” shoot, archery becomes for him the “artless art” and passes over into Zen. “Bow and arrow are only a pretext for something that could just as well happen without them, only the way to a goal, not the goal itself, only helps for the last decisive leap.”<sup>5</sup>

When we ask what becomes perfect through practice of celibacy or what does the practice of celibacy do for us or to us, we may come up with a simple answer of surrender to the One who is all powerful. In light of the Herrigel story, the practice accomplishes its goal by shifting the sense of agency, the sense of who is really in charge. It works when we let that Other who has invited us to the practice take charge and guide us on our way. The point is that practices are not ends but means to a goal—in our case, that goal is God. Practices and their role in religious or spiritual development are the subject of an increasing number of investigations.<sup>6</sup> What

4. *Ibid.*, 53.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.

6. Among the more recent efforts are: *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999); and Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America*

often remains unexplored is how these faith-based tools work on us. As Michel Foucault once remarked: “People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does.”<sup>7</sup>

William Spohn has thrown some light on how Christian spiritual

*Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), esp. Chapter 7, “The Practice of Spirituality,” 168–198. Earlier works include: Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988); Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator’s Alternative to Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981); and Margaret R. Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1990). For an overview of the practices in relation to biblical interpretation, see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Practice” in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A.K.M. Adam (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 189–198. For a social science perspective on practices, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). For a philosophical account, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), esp. 187–203.

7. Cited in Huber L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 187.

practices do what they do.<sup>8</sup> Approaching practices as the ordinary means that Christians use to shape their lives in the pattern of Christ, Spohn directs attention to how they train the imagination as well as form dispositions that give rise to a vibrant moral life. Practices are then both pedagogical and transformational. Their power is related to their ability to form character and tutor the affections, thus leading people to acting in virtuous ways. “Both oral and spiritual practices set us up for the right dispositions. They channel good intentions into habitual behavior, and those habits evoke and train the dispositions of the heart.”<sup>9</sup>

Celibacy, by its very nature, is an all-embracing practice. As Richard Sipe has defined it: “Celibacy is a freely chosen dynamic state usually vowed that involves an honest and sustained attempt to live without direct sexual gratification in order to serve productively for spiritual motive.”<sup>10</sup> Put another way, celibacy is a practice of channeling sexual energy in creative ways while foregoing all deliberate sexual experience. It recognizes that *eros* or sexual energy is that which allows connection with others, creative investment in life and work, and makes joyful and joy-giving living possible.

It is a practice that is grown into across the lifespan and draws into its service a host of other practices. I want to suggest that we might think of these allied practices as arranged in such a way that, while they are all ongoing, certain ones have special moments of ascendancy in the course of the lifespan. We might think of them as following an epigenetic principle, much as is the case in human

8. William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

9. *Ibid.*, 39.

10. *Living the Celibate Life: A Search for Models and Meaning* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri/Triumph, 2004), 12.

embryonic development where all organs are developing even while certain ones have their special moment in the sun.

Inasmuch as spiritual practices shape and form the self, we can think of them as gradually effecting a conversion of the self of the person practicing them.<sup>11</sup> From being an isolated self absorbed in one's own concerns, the person, through these practices, begins to emerge as the person for others. The goal of the practice of celibacy is that there emerges a self that is in no way withered and encapsulated, but a self fully alive ready to connect in vibrant relationships with others and with the Other. In other words, the process that unfolds as we practice celibacy is one of radical conversion. Each step along the way across the lifespan, we are challenged to leave behind old attitudes and habits and embrace new ones under the tutelage of celibacy.

We leave behind isolated, stagnant, despairing stances to embrace a position where we are intimate, generative and hopeful people. The celibate self that emerges is the self that is hospitable, pure of heart, passionately engaged with God, caring of self and others, given to reading and playing, centered, free, in harmonious voice and grateful. Such a self was built on the four pillars of celibacy formation: the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral development. Let us begin our journey and see how the whole process unfolds.

### **1. Earlier Years – Fulfilling Intimacy Needs and Finding One's Niche**

11. See Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self" in *Technologies of the Self*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49; and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), esp. 83-167.



Often, as we start our celibacy journey, we are not all that far along in our adult life course and so we face tasks that all starting out adults face, such as mapping a course for ourselves in light of some dream we have for our future, finding the necessary resources to sustain us on the way, and finding significant others with whom we can share our adventure and get the necessary pointers that help us along the way.

### **Tasks**

Of course, the celibate person starting out has some particular challenges that others do not face or at least do not face with the same intensity. Celibacy may be a gift, but it is also a choice that we are challenged to make with awareness of what is entailed. Celibacy is a process and not something that is facily accepted and acknowledged and then forgotten. Clifford J. Stevens observes: “It is important for the healthy growth of the vocation to celibacy that what was *implicit* in the choice of celibacy become *explicit* by reflection and personal probing.”<sup>12</sup> Here it is necessary to sort out intentions – why is one seeking this particular way of living out one’s sexuality. Some spiritual practices will be particularly important in moving along the clarification process and strengthening one’s resolution to be celibate.

Like other people, the celibate needs to firm up a sense of identity, a sense of who I am. This entails a review and integration of self-images built up over a lifetime so far, as well as making a commitment to the image of who I want to be that fits with my strengths and takes account of my known weaknesses and limitations. There are, here and elsewhere, pitfalls to be avoided—“clericalism” can appear as a mask that I can take on without ever fully apprehending who I am. It serves as a screen, keeping my true self hidden from others but also from myself. Granted, we consciously avoid such pitfalls; yet owning who I am

12. *Intimacy with God: Notes on the Vocation to Celibacy* (Schuyler, NE: BMH Publications, 1992), 41.

is still a little more painful because I, in my commitment to the practice of celibacy, differ from lots of people in my world. Because I am celibate, I do not have that one human other, a spouse, who gives me on an almost daily basis the feedback that helps reinforce my sense of who I am. Having no spouse, no new family of my own, I stand somewhat alone and have to grieve that I have chosen not to have what other people have. I am different.

For some, in the early years of celibacy practice, the celibate project is taken in stride because so much energy is put into trying to get oneself established in a ministerial career and to build up a sense of competence in various ministerial skills, such as preaching, teaching, ritualizing, etc. There can be a drivenness in these early years that keeps questions from arising, primarily because the person is so exhausted that the mind refuses to entertain distractions of any sort. But the challenge remains, in the midst of all the busyness, to establish some relationships where intimacy needs are met. Not only intimacy with others, but intimacy with self is necessary if a good fit is to be found, and the sense that I am in the right place, the place that God wants me to be, is established solidly.

Consolidating a strong identity (a sense of who I am), strengthening one's commitment to a celibate life, grieving what I am leaving behind in terms of family and genital relationships, and apprenticing in ministry under the direction of a skilled priestly mentor—these are some of the challenges, the tasks, that await people as they begin the celibate journey. It's somewhat like the practice of singing, where learning to breathe properly is a key to success. Navigating these tasks of the earlier years of a celibate journey is facilitated by engaging in some spiritual practices that will have lifelong significance; committing to them transforms the self. Three should enjoy special prominence in the earlier years of the celibate journey: hospitality, confession and prayer.

### **Hosting Others - Letting People into Our Lives**

Welcoming is a fundamental Christian attitude, and it is very much related to the Paschal tonality of a life where the Risen Christ encounters us in many places. One welcomes not only guests,

people of all sorts, but life itself with all its ups and downs, knowing that in such encounters one meets Christ. Being a gracious host or hostess requires that we be comfortable in our own space. Such comfort means that we are clear to ourselves and to others about our commitment to celibacy. It is becoming part of our identity and permits us to let people draw close to us without our feeling threatened. People, in turn, can enter our lives with a sense of security, knowing that they are “sexually safe.” We are at home with ourselves, and people feel at ease.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, that means that we continue to examine fears that operate in us and sometimes motivate us to choose stances in life that keep us away from people. We must own our own histories, including our sexual histories, with their sad and happy chapters. We accept ourselves as people in process and we are comfortable we are moving in the right direction. The result is that we have a certain centeredness that allows us graciously to receive others. We see them as potential friends and not as potential enemies to be warded off. We also know something about boundaries—our own and other people’s boundaries. The invasive host who intrudes into the life or space of a guest is quite different from the respectful host who can invite someone into a friendly space where they can feel at ease, knowing they are respected and honored.

This is not to say that there will not be moments when the sudden appearance of a guest makes us conscious of, perhaps embarrassed about, the condition of our house or, in this case, our very self. But by and large, we are committed to keeping our internal house in order and do so. Hence, we are normally comfortable with any guest dropping in and looking around. We are people who feel we have something to serve, to give; most especially, we have something to

13. Cozzens, *Freeing Celibacy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 26. See also Henri Nouwen, “Hospitality,” *Monastic Studies* 10 (1974): 1-28.

teach about what is possible in grace. We are ready to be there for them with our clear commitment to celibacy, our deep beliefs, and our own experience of struggle and grace.

To be hospitable is to be vulnerable. Guests might knock over and break treasured antiques. Valuable things disappear and we may feel diminished. Dorothy Day, a committed celibate, and the people of the Catholic Worker movement whom she inspired could testify to how costly to hosts and hostesses hospitality can be. To be hospitable in such circumstances is a challenge. In the monastic tradition, there is the life of St. Meinrad, which recounts how the hermit joyfully received people whom he knew intended to harm him and steal the little he had, even offering them food and drink. This martyr of hospitality is a witness to the fundamental Christian truth that through death comes life, through loss comes gain. Stolen goods include all sorts of things, even something like time. Loss, though painful, can be liberating.

Creating space for others is a hallmark of hospitality. We are to create space for others to come into their lives to minister to them, to relate to them, to learn from them. Clutter—the clutter of rooms, the clutter in lives, the clutter of self-absorption—keeps people out. There is no place to come in and be received. Our own interests and preoccupations can so fill the space around us that there is no way someone can come in. Celibacy is not for walling ourselves off, for locking ourselves away with our own pet projects and interests, but for openness to others and to God. Detachment is the old term for creating conditions for openness. Poverty of spirit, another term with Gospel roots, means letting go of those many things we are safeguarding and so bringing greater openness to self and others and the Other.

Strange though it may sound, poverty makes for a great host. And celibacy, according to one writer, can be thought of as a kind of poverty.<sup>14</sup> For celibates trust, as the poor have to, that the human

#### 14. Cozzens, 16.

intimacy we all thirst for will come to them without manipulation. Celibates live with radical openness and trust, and that is why they can make wonderful hosts. They are ready to receive the gift of the other. They know also that hospitality will make further demands on them, that it will be an agent of ongoing conversion in their lives. They are ready for hospitality to rob them of some of their preferred ways of thinking of people and things. Long-held notions can crumble as we let people into our space. Poverty of spirit includes a poverty of heart, where we let go of old prejudices and poverty of mind, where we are willing to set aside even some of our long-held opinions.

I had a friend who spent his adult years until his death at age 54 working for the Catholic Worker. He told a powerful story about how a simple act of hospitality, giving someone something to eat, worked a conversion in him. In winter of 1978, as a graduate student at George Washington University in sociology, he passed a homeless man keeping warm on a grate by the state department building. The man asked for food, but Michael ignored him and kept walking to his dorm room. Unsettled, he had second thoughts and took back a bowl of soup to the man. So began a life mission; he continued to bring food to homeless people.

But shortly, there was an important turning point: “One night, as I brought down a large gallon jug of hot split pea soup and set it down on the cement block near the heating vent where they gathered, a rather rough-looking fellow picked up the jar of soup and, in one motion, broke the jar over my head.”<sup>15</sup> Michael continues: “Instead of running away, I asked the man why he had done that. These were probably the first words I had ever spoken to any of them. He told

15. Michael Kirwan, “Hospitality is Mutual Trust and Respect,” first published in the *Catholic Worker*, September 1991, accessed at <http://www.catholicworker.com/kirwan.htm>.

me that I was doing nothing more than bringing food to the dogs. I was bringing food, setting it down like I was feeding them out of a pet dish and just walking away. He said, “Talk to us. Visit with us. We don’t bite.”

Michael offered this assessment of that event: “What happened that night was that the first barrier had been broken in my perceptions of who homeless people are. I realized that these men and women on the streets had feelings, just like me. They wanted to be loved and respected and listened to. They cared that someone cared about them, but just giving food and a blanket was not enough.”<sup>16</sup> Hospitality changes us. Celibacy should lead us to an unconditional hospitality.

### **Confessing What’s Going On**

Another practice that connects closely with the practice of celibacy is confessing. As you may be aware, the word itself, “confessing,” can have a number of possible referents. We most often associate it in Catholic circles with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where the penitent confesses his or her sins, expresses sorrow and then receives absolution. In the secular press, we read from time to time of someone confessing to a crime. Another meaning that we know, but think of less quickly, is “confessing” as an expression of faith and belief. Augustine’s *Confessions* are less a detailed recounting of his misdeeds and more an eloquent testimony to God and what God has done in Augustine’s life.

Here I want to give “confessing” the sense of owning up to what’s going on in us to some other, such as a spiritual director or a trusted friend. We confess also to God and to ourselves as well. While obviously this owning up may mean declaring our sins or sinful tendencies, it can include much else such as our thoughts and aspirations, our fantasies and temptations. It is a practice that has a long venerable history in our spiritual tradition. It sustains us in

16. Ibid.

our celibate journey, because it helps us to see and clarify what is going on in us and facilitates our movement to being our true self. In our spiritual context, confessing always implies, at a deep level, an acknowledgement of the sustaining presence of an all-merciful God. In the Desert Tradition of ancient monasticism, we find extensive evidence of confession used as a practice for furthering celibate growth and also find there some reflection on the value and point of the practice.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers flourished around the fourth and fifth centuries especially in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. As you may be aware, many of their sayings have come down to us in various collections. These sayings give insight into the struggles of the early monastics in their pursuit of goals such as celibacy and constant prayer. They also provide a glimpse at the special relationship that existed between disciples and their spiritual elders. It was to the desert that those called to the monastic life went to battle with the demonic.

Monastics were helped and guided in the struggles by elders, individuals who had been through like experience and thus had won the title of Abba or Amma. The dialogue between the elder and the disciple consisted of a confession, perhaps of a doubt or evil tendency, by the disciple and then a response of wise counsel by the elder. An example: “A brother came to Poemen and said to him, ‘Many thoughts come into my mind and put me in danger.’ He sent him out into the open air, and said, ‘Open your lungs and do not breathe.’ He replied, ‘I can’t do that.’ Then he said to him: ‘Just as you can’t stop air coming into your lungs, so you can’t stop thoughts coming into your mind. Your part is to resist them.’”<sup>17</sup>

A basic belief in the desert was that people must break out of

17. *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, trans. Benedicta Ward (New York: Penguin, 2003), 101, no. 55.

themselves by disclosing their problem to an elder; this was the first step in a process of healing. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the Desert Tradition was the unique ability to elicit a confession from disciples. This was not a matter of prying, but rather a way of creating a situation and a relationship of trust wherein disciples could open themselves. If disciples could articulate their problems, they would gain peace.<sup>18</sup> The spiritual elder tried in every possible way to break down the walls of silent resistance.

A well-known story illustrates this: Abba Macarios knows that a younger man Theopemptos is tempted and in danger. “When he was alone with him, the old man asked him, ‘How are you getting on?’ Theopemptos replied, ‘Thanks to your prayers, all goes well.’ The old man asked: ‘Do not your thoughts war against you?’ He replied: ‘Up to now, it is all right,’ for he was afraid to admit anything. The old man said to him, ‘See how many years I have lived as an ascetic, and am praised by all, and though I am old, the spirit of fornication troubles me.’ Theopemptos said, ‘Believe me, abba, it is the same with me.’ The old man went on admitting that other thoughts warred against him, until he had brought him to admit them about himself.”<sup>19</sup>

The concern of the desert elders throughout their confessional method was that disciples might patiently come to discover the truth of themselves. The whole of the desert experience—a relentless quest for the truth exercised with extraordinary patience—sought to make humans conscious of all that was false

18. On this point and for the whole phenomenon of desert confession, see H. Dörries, “The Place of Confession in Ancient Monasticism” in *Studia Patristica* V, ed. F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962), 284-311.
19. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 107.



and sinful in themselves. Confrontations with the truth start a conversion process. People find themselves in a movement toward liberation and a future filled with possibilities.

What happened in the desert happens today in the many moments of confession that can occur in spiritual direction or deep spiritual friendship. Celibates learn to pay attention to themselves and their inner lives. Sexual thoughts and desires will be there, but in such relationships celibates can ask what these mean in their lives, what do they say about the individuals themselves. Self-knowledge and self-acceptance are enhanced. Somewhat as in 12-step programs, to have someone with whom to share one's history and struggles is important, and that person then acts as a sponsor to one's growth and development. Making good use of relationships such as spiritual direction facilitates celibate development.

In the fifth century, John Cassian, drawing on the Desert Tradition, described a gradual evolution in the celibate process that indicates an ever-greater integration of psychic forces and a focusing of one's heart on God. One's inner consciousness unifies around an awareness of God's presence as the grounds of all life and reality. Prayer is the place where that awareness grows and so is the next practice that has a crucial role in providing a solid foundation for the celibate adventure.

### **Becoming Intimate with God**

Prayer is the central place where celibates can satisfy their deep need for connectedness. It is a place where comfort and solace may be found in the midst of ongoing struggles for acceptance and for love. Prayer is a practice that puts people in touch with their deeper self and the various images of self that they may have. In the quiet of personal prayer, one meets the self with all its various longings. The why of prayer is found in the many desires of the human person and, ultimately, in the desire the person has for a relationship with the Transcendent God.

Ann and Barry Ulanov, in a book on the psychology of prayer, have drawn attention to how an evolution of desire in prayer culminates

in the fundamental desire for connection with God at the Center of one's being.<sup>20</sup> Desires for success, fame, money, power, sex give way to the core desire of God. Celibates strive to consciously ground themselves in God as the source of their being. Praying is their consciously being and living their true selves as having origins in God and finding completion only in God.

Personal prayer can be an occasion for celibates to come into contact with some of the forces that pull them away from their true spiritual identity. In the context of prayer, the imagination puts before the person some images of self that run counter to the spiritual quest. Although these negative images may be dismissed as simply distractions unworthy of attention, taking note of them can provide insight into the shadow side of the self (the part we keep hidden). These so-called distractions may serve as windows on one's envious and rivalrous feelings. Distractions can reveal the false self, those deviations from the full self that God intends a person to realize. Distortions, both in our perceptions of ourselves and in our understanding and imaging of God, come into clear purview and can be reworked. It is a painful and necessary part of deepening our relationship with the Divine. Much as we are guilty of projecting sometimes base attitudes and devious motives on others, we also can project onto God features that bear the stamp of our own distorted thinking and do not match the reality of God as revealed in the Scriptures. In the faith encounter with the sacred that is prayer, images are purified, transformed and transcended, though gradually and, at times, painfully.

But the real point of prayer is building and experiencing an intimate relationship with the Lord. Like all intimate relationships, it is multifaceted—it has both verbal and nonverbal activities associated with it. In the beginning, people spend time talking to God about their needs and their concerns. Some of this talking is

20. *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982).

quite spontaneous; some of it is a silent communion with the Divine in whose presence one places oneself. As they open to their own depths, celibates and others hear God's response written in the very depths of their selves. They discover that they themselves are words spoken by God—going into their own depths, they meet there the living God who has spoken to them and whose image they are. They discover in their depths, in Sebastian Moore's way of putting it, that they are made infinitely loveable and are loved by an infinite God. In prayer, the sexual energy we have becomes channeled into an intense passion for God. Without prayer, celibacy becomes simply deprivation and not an experience of the fullness of life for which all humanity longs.

William James once described conversion as developing a new "hot spot" within your consciousness around which one can organize one's life and direct one's energies. For the celibate, the "hot spot" should, of course, be God. I am reminded here of Bernard Lonergan's description of religious conversion as radically falling in love with God. I suppose we might want to add to that definition that staying in love and working on the relationship through regular prayer are part of ongoing religious conversion. Richard Rolle, a 14th-century mystic and devotional writer, wrote a little work titled *The Fire of Love*. In that work, he writes about how the love of God becomes a fire within the person who earnestly seeks God. In the celibate, the love of God must also burn—lighting the way to a more intense relationship with the divine. Celibates, along with other Christians, must be the mystics whom Karl Rahner sees as the future of the Church.

## **2. Middle Years – Finding New Avenues of Care**

You don't hear all that much about the midlife crisis these days, but entry into the middle years of any life or career brings its own set of challenges. Of course, actually defining when one is in the middle years seems to be a matter of opinion. Typically, for those who have married and raised a family, there are adjustments to be made as

children grow up and no longer need care in the same way they did before, and so there is opportunity for parents to find new avenues for care. For everyone, these middle years are times for reassessing and possibly making adjustments in the direction one is headed. Sometimes, the way forward is clear; at other times, things can seem pretty dark. The loss of direction has been poignantly described by Dante in the “Inferno” of *The Divine Comedy*:

In the middle of the journey of our life  
I came to myself within a dark wood  
Where the straight way was lost.<sup>21</sup>

Carl Jung captured powerfully the sense that things need to change when he wrote: “We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life’s morning – for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.”<sup>22</sup> Celibates, too, need to step back and fashion for themselves an afternoon strategy for continuing to live out their celibate commitment as vibrantly as they can.

### **Issues**

Like others, celibates may need to re-examine the focus of their caring actions. Much care has gone into the service of the people to whom one ministers. The question may now be: what or whom has been overlooked and needs to be cared for now? With accumulated years comes increased courage to look more deeply at self and the life of ministry one is pursuing. There may be accumulated feelings of frustration or dissatisfaction that need to be addressed. The middle years, for some, seem to be a time of instinctual

21. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, I, *Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 23.
22. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1933), 108.

reawakening, almost as though one is experiencing a second adolescence. The sense that time is running out for some things, for some adventures, may increase temptations to abandon the present course and move in new directions. The fact that members of your age cohort have raised families and now enjoy seeing children assume independence brings home what the celibate commitment has asked and what has been given up.

There is, too, the hankering after youth, a desire to recapture what seems to be passing all too quickly. I suppose the midlife crisis scenario of the middle-aged executive running off with the young assistant in the office, abandoning family and other commitments, has had its parallels in ordained ministry. Who doesn't want to be young again, we tell ourselves. Add to all this the disillusionment that comes as we see things more accurately and you have a goodly number of issues to face in the middle years. When you make it to the top, things often don't look as good as you thought they would. Once again, there are spiritual practices that probably we are already adept at that can be brought into even greater service as we face midlife challenges. I will mention three—caring for self, reading and playing (alas, a neglected spiritual practice).

### **Caring for the Self**

Probably “caring for the self” does not make it to a lot of our lists of spiritual practices, but, if you think about it, it has to be one of the more important, though is often overlooked. It doesn't seem virtuous, at first glance, to care for the self. But it is also a very important practice for celibates at whatever age. Caring for the self entails paying attention to the self and its needs and coming to a more accurate sense of who this self is. One of the earliest pieces of writing on the “midlife crisis” described a depressive crisis that people went through as they faced two issues having to do with the self. One was the fact of mortality—this embodied self as I know it will face the fate of disintegration in death. We all know that intellectually, but a part of us can harbor an emotional sense that we are exempt from what others must face.

The second issue is a recognition, more clearly than before, that

some of that evil that I hate so much out there in other people can be found in my own self. I sometimes have done hateful things to others and to myself. The midlife crisis can happen because two cherished notions—that I am physically immortal and that I am all good—are seen as illusions that must be given up. I am mortal and flawed like everyone else. However, as the Gospel of John tells us, the truth will set you free; and so we can begin to accept our limits and to undo damage done by caring more deeply for others and for ourselves.

Once I accept the fact that I am flawed (I still have temptations and fail from time to time), I can do what the Christian spiritual tradition always invites us to do—surrender to God. My drive to make myself perfect was a bit of an ego trip. I can now rest, relax and let God do what I cannot do—bring things to perfection. I can even now surrender control and let God's Spirit take charge. Jesus drew attention to this shift that occurs in life when He spoke to Peter about the fate that Peter could expect. "When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go" (Jn 21:18). What begins to emerge is a different way of relating to one's vocation and commitments. Having made the choices we have, we now let ministry, let the commitment to celibacy, shape and form us. In other words, Jesus' words to Peter are not only about advanced age. It happens to us as choices already made shape and form us. If we care about ourselves, we let this happen because we have come to know how easily our own lesser side can take over. We need God's Spirit to be in charge.

One aspect of self-care that has special relevance to celibates in ministry is letting go of doing everything ourselves. Rather than seeing ourselves as part of a team, a cooperative venture in the Body which is the Church, we fall prey to thinking of ourselves in some competitive struggle to be the best and most recognized of ministers. Envy of the younger can make its appearance as we assess the greater energy and creativity of those who are coming

up the ranks behind us. Self-care should lead us to give up this unwarranted competitiveness and see ourselves as cooperating with others in what is, ultimately, God's work. At the same time, we need to recognize that we are important contributors to others. One way we care both for ourselves and for others is by mentoring those less experienced than ourselves. Such service reminds us of the riches we have acquired in our years of ministerial experience, as well as gifts others with the wisdom we have to share.

Another dimension of self-care that receives a fair amount of attention in the literature on celibacy is cultivating solitude. A book came out about 20 years ago by Anthony Storr, a psychiatrist, titled *Solitude: A Return to the Self*.<sup>23</sup> In that work, Storr attends to how important solitude is in the lives of creative people. He acknowledges the special place that solitude has in the lives of celibates. We, of course, have ample testimony to the importance of solitude for celibates in the many who have gone before us. What is necessary for us is to learn to move beyond the experience of loneliness to what Sipe calls "aloneness" and Nouwen designates "solitude."<sup>24</sup> The challenge is to develop an awareness of a presence at the very center of one's being.

I am reminded of a beautiful passage from an unknown monk of the 13th century who is writing about the encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the Garden after the Resurrection. Jesus speaks to her in these words from this anonymous author: "Woman, why are weeping? Whom are you looking for? The one you seek is in your possession, and you do not know it? You have the true, the eternal joy, and yet you weep? It is within your inmost being, and you look for it without? You stand outside, weeping at the tomb. Your heart is my tomb. And I am not dead there, but I take my rest

23. (New York: Free Press, 1988).

24. See Sipe, 144; and Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: Doubleday, 1975): 23-62.

in your heart living forever.”<sup>25</sup> Loneliness pains and frightens us; solitude renews us and empowers us. To seek solitude is to care for the self.

### **Reading and Reading Life**

Reading is a spiritual practice that, throughout ministerial life, can have a profound impact and guide people in living out their celibate lives. It can have a special significance in the middle years, because one is trying to read not only the Scriptures, but life and life's events as well, to discover their deeper meaning. The Scriptures and the reading of them, both publicly and privately, have, of course, a special place within Christianity. In the familiar account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:23-32), two disciples have abandoned their mission and are walking along dejectedly. Their coming to faith is initiated by the Stranger directing them once again to the Scriptures and is completed by the sacramental gesture of breaking the bread. They allow the Stranger to speak and He opens to them the Scriptures. The Scriptures become a sacrament for them.<sup>26</sup> “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke

25. Cited in Andre Louf, *Teach Us to Pray* (New York: Paulist, 1975): 38.

26. As Louis-Marie Chauvet notes, “The Scriptures are truly the sacrament of the word, but precisely, they are *only* its sacrament.... This is why for Christians the word of God is not immediately the Book..., but someone, the One who ‘fulfills’ the Book, Jesus, the Christ.” *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 45. See Chauvet’s extensive commentary on the Emmaus event in his *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*,



to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us [Lk 24:32 NAB]?” They are energized by their encounter in word and sacrament and return to their mission as disciples.

Part of their newly acquired competence as disciples is a new way of reading the Scriptures. As Louis-Marie Chauvet observes, “It is a completely new hermeneutics...of all the Scriptures that [the Stranger] proposes to them.... Luke tells us that the key to understanding God’s whole plan according to the Scriptures is the death and resurrection of the Messiah.”<sup>27</sup> Rereading the Scriptures with Christ in mind becomes a central practice for Christians. Archbishop Martini, commenting on the meaning of “opening the Scriptures to them,” remarks: “So in the Scripture we find a way of drawing the divinely inspired threads of human desire for truth and goodness into a coherent whole...I feel that the Scriptures both understand and interpret me, the Scriptures tell me what I desire and fear and give me the key to both aspirations and expectations. They provide a mirror for the [one] seeking God, the [one] who is searching for truth and the meaning of life.”<sup>28</sup> Centuries ago, early Christian writers such as Origen emphasized the potential for transformation and the role of the Spirit in the practice of reading.

But what type of reading is it that has such a great impact? Introducing his term for it, Richard R. Niebuhr writes of “deep reading:”<sup>29</sup> This is a way of reading the Scriptures that is attuned to

trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont  
(Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 161-70.

27. Chauvet, *Sacraments*, 24.

28. Carlo Maria Martini, *Ministers of the Gospel: Meditations on St. Luke’s Gospel*, trans. Susan Leslie (Middlegreen: St. Paul Publications, 1983), 103.

29. “The Strife of Interpreting: The Moral Burden of Imagination,” *Parabola* 10:2 (May 1985): 39.

the language and word patterns that lead to the innovative rather than the conventional, a way of reading that challenges rather than affirms the status quo. It is an experiential reading in which readers allow their experience and the passage to interconnect. Niebuhr describes it in this way: "...In deep reading we do not have a text 'before' us as much as a 'presence' of voices, of living words and symbols, around us.... Reading of this kind is similar to living in a sprawling house, in which we climb up and down and explore adjoining rooms, halls, and yard."<sup>30</sup> Continuing the spatial analogy, he notes: "But deep reading is still more lively and complex; for we are continuously stepping in and out of this voluminous space, now regarding its written symbols from the 'outside' as though inscribed on a facade and now living and exploring in their midst."<sup>31</sup>

Robert Mulholland, like Niebuhr, wants to accentuate the power of the Scriptures to break into lives and to suggest new and daring possibilities.<sup>32</sup> He explains that the Scriptures are able to do this because they, as it were, break the crust that keeps us insulated and resistant to change. By shifting our usual perceptual focus, they open us to the possibility of a new slant on things.<sup>33</sup> Paralleling a distinction sometimes made between extensive and intensive reading, Mulholland speaks of informational and formational reading. In the case of informational reading, the text is perceived as an object to be mastered and the knowledge gained as something that will have pragmatic benefits for us. A major difference in formational reading is the willingness of the reader to let the text shape him or her and work in its own way.<sup>34</sup> The crust that prevents

30. Ibid., 40.

31. Ibid.

32. *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1985).

33. Ibid., 33.

34. Ibid., 49-59.

the entrance of the Word into one's life is, as Mulholland sees it, the culturally reinforced tendency to approach everything from a functional, informational standpoint, to see all things in terms of what they can do for us.<sup>35</sup> With their crust intact, readers are imprisoned in a cold, factual world, kept from fully imagining a world filled with the surprises and innovations of grace.

What these contemporary writers are describing is nothing other than the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. This engagement of the word through *lectio divina* makes of the reader a true minister, in the phrase of Henri Nouwen, a "living reminder of God."<sup>36</sup> The priest, as a faithful practitioner of *lectio*, is affected in his whole being and comes to embody the word in the way he lives and acts;

35. *Ibid.*, 110-112. See also Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 47-48. Using his own terms, Wink amplifies on what breaking out of one's usual frame of reference means: "Having begun ... as the object of a subject (the heritage), I revolt ... and establish myself as a subject with an object (the text), only to find myself in the end ... as both the subject and object of the text and the subject and object of my own self-reflection. Thus there is achieved a communion of horizons, in which the encounter between the horizon of the transmitted text lights up one's own horizon and leads to self-disclosure and self-understanding, while at the same time one's own horizon lights up lost elements of the text and brings them forward with relevance for life today," 66-67.
36. *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (New York: Seabury, 1977).

he becomes an artist of the word. Donald Cozzens writes about the priest “tending the word” and suggests that through that activity the identity of the priest comes into focus.<sup>37</sup> “Tenders of the word must sit with God’s word, savor it as a wine connoisseur savors a winery’s prize vintage. He reads it slowly and carefully, letting it filter into the corners of his unconscious where it takes root under the quiet tutoring of his imagination.”<sup>38</sup>

George Steiner, the literary critic, has argued that the classic way of reading put people in touch with what he calls “real presence,” the very energy of life, that which gives fullness to life and banishes emptiness.<sup>39</sup> That way of reading has been threatened not only by technological advances, but also by literary theories such as deconstruction and post-structuralism and by psychoanalysis, which questions the relationship between words and meaning, between words and world. As Steiner indicates, the covenant once established between word and world has been broken; the word is in crisis.<sup>40</sup> People are skeptical of what words mean, and of what the world means. To read in the ancient way is not only to decipher the meaning signified by the alphabetic characters, but also to read the world as pregnant with meaning. It is to read in such a way that one connects with a presence that is the ultimate source of meaning and an unspoken answer to human questions.

Testimony to the ability to read in this way comes from

37. *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, 84.

38. *Ibid.*, 91.

39. See George Steiner, “The Uncommon Reader” and “Real Presences” in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 1–19; 20–39; and *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), esp. pp. 137–232.

40. *Real Presences*, pp. 90–96.

unexpected sources. The teen David Kern in John Updike's short story, "Pigeon Feathers," learns to read in this fuller way in struggling with a question that plagues him, the reality of the afterlife. He wonders what, if anything, awaits him after death. Brought up as a Christian, he turns to his minister at a Sunday school class. However, the minister's vapid answer—comparing the afterlife to Abraham Lincoln's goodness living on after him—angers David and even seems to betray Christianity. He looks to his parents for an answer, but there confronts a passionless view of life and ineffectual witness to faith. He hungers and aches for more. One day, though, he finds the answer in the feathers of some dead pigeons he is burying. He, in effect, "reads" pigeon feathers and gets his answer. "He lost himself in the geometrical tides as the feathers now broadened and stiffened to make an edge for flight, now softened and constricted to cup warmth around the mute flesh. And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him."<sup>41</sup> In "reading" these pigeon feathers, David encounters the transcendent, the "real presence" that gives his life meaning and answers his longing.

The Scriptures most often provide us with texts for *lectio*, but, at the same time, reading them trains us to read the other texts that life itself provides. The God who speaks in the Scriptures speaks in human experience as well. The *Rule of St. Benedict* that legislated for periods of *lectio* in the daily lives of monks also called attention to the "revelations" that can come from the young in the community or from visiting monks. Christ was to be recognized in the guests and in the sick. In other words, the *Rule* prescribed a particular way of reading human experience in light of the Scriptures. *Lectio*, which begins with the Scriptures and is sustained by them, amplifies

41. In *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1962): 105.

to include life's various experiences. Events, feelings, even conflicts—all can have revelatory power. They, too, need to be read and digested.<sup>42</sup> In the middle years, this type of reading becomes especially crucial for ongoing celibate development.

### **Playing**

Charles Dickens' novel *Hard Times* opens with a chapter titled "The One Thing Needful," in which the narrator claims that *facts* are that one thing needful.<sup>43</sup> Facts form the heart and center of the schooling children receive in the industrialized society of Coketown, where the novel is set. "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else."<sup>44</sup> Thomas Gradgrind, "a man of facts and calculations," is the proud sponsor of this approach and his own children suffer because of it. Their starved imaginations were the consequence of such obsessive focus on the world of facts. "Murdering the Innocents" is the apt title for the chapter that details the operations of Gradgrind's school, where children are known by a number rather than a name. A government spokesperson announces to the students: "We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact."<sup>45</sup>

Dickens is out to protest a society that no longer nourishes the imagination. He laments, too, that religion, a stimulus to hopeful

42. See Norvene Vest, *No Moment Too Small: Rhythms of Silence, Prayer, and Holy Reading* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994), 78-86.
43. *Hard Times: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed., ed. Fred Kaplan and Sylvère Monod (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).
44. *Ibid.*, 5.
45. *Ibid.*, 9.

imagining, is given short shrift as materialism becomes the all-encompassing creed. As one commentator notes, "Religion too is perverted and slighted, yet emerges fitfully as one of the few forces that can save men from the living death which is Coketown."<sup>46</sup> The children of Coketown are not taught to appreciate the mystery of life or to stand in awe of creation and the wonders of nature. Life is desiccated, devoid of meaning or any deep purpose apart from production and accumulation.

The concern with facts in Dickens' novel resonates with the contemporary preoccupation with information. It is easy to conclude that the students in the Gradgrind school were taught only to read for facts, for information. They were not encouraged in letting their reading tutor their imaginations. Consequently, unlike religious reading, their reading probably would not excite or inspire, would not provide purpose. In their environment, imagination was foolish and so not tapped. Yet imagination plays an important role in religious or any deep reading and opens up visions of possibility in the one who reads.

Where the Coketown children were not supposed to venture was the world of creative imagining, the world of play that would enable them to break out of the stagnant and dehumanizing world they inhabited. The psychoanalyst and pediatrician D.W. Winnicott saw the ability to live creatively as related to a type of experiencing that moves beyond hard facts and imagines and approaches reality as charged with significance. To live creatively is to enter a world of illusion, a world that first takes shape in early childhood but has lifelong significance.<sup>47</sup> To live creatively is to take the mundane and

46. Robert Barnard, "Imagery and Theme in *Hard Times*," in *ibid.*, 394.

47. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), 1-6; Raymond Studzinski, "Tutoring the Religious

make it into something enriching and consoling. For celibates, entry into the world of arts, literature and music can provide the type of refreshment and renewal that keeps them from becoming stagnant. Interest in things such as the arts is a strong indicator that celibacy is not about emaciated living, but about living fully and vibrantly.

Creative involvements help keep celibates from what can be a pitfall of the middle years. What they are able to avoid is that tendency to squelch the initiatives of those who are coming behind them. Immersion in the creative world enables people to stay open to the innovative even as they continue to value the tradition. They become mentors in the best sense—able to pass on the long heritage of Christian ministry, but also able to encourage new initiatives. Envy, that great spoiler, of intergenerational cooperation is vanquished as the middle ager is grateful for his gifts and experience, but ready to be enriched by the gifts and experience of others.

### **3. Mature Years – Finishing Life Off – Was It Worth It?**

Aging is both a gift and yet a difficult passage further complicated by the particular cultural milieu we live in. It challenges us both individually and as communities. Priests and presbyterates are no exception. It should not be surprising that one perspective on dealing with aging that quickly emerges from a Christian perspective is that of conversion. Conversion, of course, is close to the heart of what we are about as Christians. Thomas Merton once wisely observed that, while we have strength for one or two serious conversions, we often balk at the future ones that come our way. Yet they are precisely the needed changes that will set us free.<sup>48</sup> Both as individuals and as communities, we are called to

Imagination: Art and Theology as Pedagogues,” *Horizons* 14:1 (1987): 24-38.

48. See the letter by Thomas Merton published in



leave behind certain old attitudes and approaches and embrace new ways of thinking and acting to respond to what our new situation is asking of us. Some of these changes require us to recommit ourselves to some of our basic Christian postures, but now with special reference to the situations of aging and diminishment.

### **Issues**

As we think about aging as celibates, two extreme possibilities present themselves: we can shrivel up like a prune or we can mature into a ripe plum. As with so many things in life, we reap what we sow. If, indeed, celibacy has been a freeing and enlivening experience, we are able in the mature years to enjoy the fruit of a marvelous openness to one another and to God. If not, we are left to despair over what might have been. The senior years are when we find ourselves looking over the story of our life lived so far. Hopefully, we like what we read and, in particular, like the main character. If we don't, we sadly realize there is no more time to write another story. Even if things have gone well for us, there is still more to be done. Once again, some spiritual practices come to the fore that prime us for negotiating what needs to be done. These practices are perhaps some of the more foundational ones of the Christian life, but seem to stand out in sharp relief at this point in the lifespan. They are: centering, self-acceptance, harmonizing and giving thanks.

### **Centering**

Celibate elders can come to a level of integration and centering that is breathtaking. Sipe writes: "There is something mystic about men who have integrated celibacy firmly and unequivocally into their being and behavior. The awareness of the transcendent in themselves and others past and future comes together in them and

*Informations Catholiques internationales* (April 1973)  
cited in J. Paquier, "Experience and Conversion," *The Way*  
17 (1977): 121.

in their work.... They have a spiritual transparency – they indeed are what they seem to be.”<sup>49</sup> What has brought them to this point and keeps them centered is their own effort not to get distracted from that which alone will satisfy their human hearts. They have learned detachment from passing things and focus on that which will last. With this has come a new understanding of themselves and a deeper awareness of God. The way to this new awareness has not always been smooth and easy.

The experience of elder celibates reveals the truth of the basic loneliness of the human heart, but also points toward its resolution. In Ingmar Bergman’s movie “Wild Strawberries,” a medical doctor in the evening of his life travels with his midlife daughter-in-law to receive a reward for 50 years of service. Along the way, he and his daughter-in-law, joined by some young hitchhikers they have picked up, recite a poem: “Where is the friend I seek everywhere? / Dawn is the time of loneliness and care... / When twilight comes, I am still yearning. / I see His trace of glory and power. / In an ear of grain and the fragrance of a flower.”<sup>50</sup>

The psychological theorist Erik Erikson, commenting on the movie and the poem, notes that there is a religious dimension to every person’s search for integrity that can culminate in finding and resting in a Transcendent Other. Celibate elders have the possibility of verifying in their own spiritual experience Augustine’s famous dictum, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”<sup>51</sup> Sebastian Moore, whom I mentioned earlier, has written eloquently about the

49. Sipe, *A Secret World*, 262.

50. Cited in Erik H. Erikson, “Reflections on Dr. Borg’s Life Cycle” in *Adulthood*, ed. Erik H. Erikson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 11-12.

51. *Confessions* I.1 in Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3.

infinite Lover who loves us infinitely and verifies what we may have always sensed: that God has made us infinitely loveable.<sup>52</sup> Such a spiritual discovery is like an oasis in what can be a very dry and barren landscape for the aging and dying.

The revelation of one's great worth before God can come precisely as people begin to let go of those various items that had previously provided them with a sense of value. Erikson talks about the movement that can come in the senior years beyond one's psychosocial identity, an identity shaped by ministry and various relationships, to an existential identity, that aspect of self that stands behind all those social roles.<sup>53</sup> Willa Cather has wonderfully illustrated this deeper identity in her novel *The Professor's House*. In that work, the protagonist Professor St. Peter is forced to come to a new sense of himself precisely as he contemplates moving with the rest of his family to a new house. He is reluctant to let go of his old house and his old view of himself, but gradually does so.

At one point Cather writes about him: "He seemed to be at the root of the matter: Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father.

52. See Sebastian Moore, *The Inner Loneliness* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); and idem., *Let This Mind Be in You: The Quest for Identity Through Oedipus to Christ* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985).
53. See Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed, Extended Version* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 64; idem., *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), p. 177; and idem., "Remarks on the 'Wider Identity,'" in *A Way of Looking at Things*, ed. Stephen Schlein (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), p. 498.

He was earth, and would return to earth.”<sup>54</sup> Professor St. Peter discovers, too, in his aging experience, that one does not always have to be doing something, but can revel in just being.

A common metaphor for living life is writing a story in which the person whose life it is functions as both the narrator and the main character. If one stays with that metaphor, we can think of old age as the time when the deadline for submitting the story nears, and so some time is spent looking over the draft, looking over the past. Gerontologists have spoken of this going over the draft as a life review.<sup>55</sup> It's a providential opportunity for taking care of unfinished business and coming to terms with one's past and all that it has involved.

One dimension of processing the past and becoming more centered involves forgiving those at whose hands one has experienced injury. Eudora Welty's novella *The Optimist's Daughter* is a brilliant description of how one person, a woman in midlife, deals with her anger over past hurts experienced as she grew up. The proximate occasion for reviewing her past is the death of her father, a respected Southern judge. After the death of this woman's mother, the father had remarried a trashy woman, and so, in his daughter's mind, had made public his betrayal of her mother, which had occurred long before the mother's death.

Painful memories of the past haunt the daughter as she attends to funeral arrangements for her father and the disposition of his property between herself and the new wife. All this comes to a head as the daughter and the new wife struggle over who will get a breadboard that has special sentimental value for the daughter. As the daughter finally lets go of the breadboard, she also lets go

54. (New York: Vintage Books, 1925), p. 265.

55. See Robert Disch, ed., *Twenty-Five Years of the Life Review: Theoretical and Practical Considerations* (New York: Haworth Press, 1988).

of the anger and pain of so many memories and lets them be truly past, over and done with. At the end of the novel, Welty writes, “It is memory that is the somnambulist. It will come back in its wounds from across the world...calling us by our names and demanding its rightful tears. It will never be impervious. The memory can be hurt, time and again – but in that may lie its final mercy. As long as it’s vulnerable to the living moment, it lives for us, and while it lives, and while we are able, we can give it up its due.”<sup>56</sup> For some elders, the availability of memories of even painful episodes of the past can be a blessing that allows them to engage in the Christian activity of forgiving and so freeing themselves from the past and opening to a future. They become centered on a self no longer held prisoner by long-ago injuries, but a self rooted in and going to God.

But even in the self’s relationship to God, there can be ongoing challenges as we grow older. In *The View in the Winter*, Ronald Blythe characterizes the reactions to growing old of some aged Anglican religious celibates he interviewed by observing: “Death is not their great worry, and they are remarkably buoyant when confronted by geriatric diseases. What disturbs them most about age is the decay of spiritual passion. Prayer is not what it was. Although they try to reignite its flame with every technique known to them, it barely sparks.”<sup>57</sup> Prayer sometimes takes on a paradoxical form in the mature years. Rather than a lively, enriching dialogue with God, it becomes a quiet waiting for God, which may not seem like prayer at all to some.

Another of the celibates interviewed by Blythe gives testimony to this experience. “The idea of waiting was hardly understood when I was young. It is so necessary, not only for us here [in the retirement

56. Eudora Welty, *The Optimist’s Daughter* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 207.

57. Ronald Blythe, *The View in Winter: Reflections on Old Age* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 238.

home] but for the world, too.... Lots of us began by being taught prayers by our mothers to say prayers, then shown by our teachers how to say more prayers, and so on we went, talking, talking, talking! But *praying*? [An] old [friend]...wrote, 'it is no longer a question of 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth,' but 'Hear, Lord, for thy servant speaketh.'"<sup>58</sup>

Some celibates encounter not a warm, reassuring divine presence, but rather an absence and emptiness. Martin Marty, the distinguished historian of modern Christianity, wrote a book after the death of his first wife, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart*.<sup>59</sup> In that work, he picks up on an observation of Karl Rahner's about people who have a wintry sort of spirituality. Unlike summery people, these winter types do not bask in a warm certainty of God's closeness and benevolence. They experience absence and distance, which breed in them doubt and struggle. They resonate quickly with Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (22:2 NAB). Of course, that particular psalm can bring comfort as it reminds the elder that another, One who has gone before them, sought refuge in its words on the cross. The psalm teaches elders to accept and even embrace their desolation experience and so come to experience hope. As later verses of the psalm declare: "For God has not spurned not disdained the misery of this poor wretch, did not turn away from me, but heard me when I cried out" (Ps 22:25).

This dark night experience, which can come at various times in a spiritual life, can certainly be the lot of some mature celibates. The challenge here for anyone is to learn to believe that God is present, despite feelings to the contrary. This is a difficult faith, but a unifying one in which the whole self is drawn together in this act of trusting and reaching out to an unseen and unexperienced God. "In this darkness," Thomas Kilduff, a late Carmelite priest, writes, "the aging face the emptiness that Jesus turns into fullness

58. *Ibid.*, 252.

59. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

and life. There are times when this emptying in the experience of older people can reach a point of desperation, a last purification on the way to spiritual identity or completion in being.”<sup>60</sup> The mature celibate emerges from this experience more firmly centered on God and possessed of a wisdom given to those who persevere in loving without concern for personal satisfaction.

### **Self-Acceptance – Embracing the Truth**

Richard Sipe writes: “The achievement of celibacy is not the accidental passage of sexual feelings into the oblivion of physical senescence.... Sex does not disappear entirely from consciousness even after years of celibate dedication.”<sup>61</sup> Life keeps us humble as struggles continue. Accepting the self means accepting the unfinished nature of the celibate journey, the fact that one must continue to work at it. Still, John Cassian notes that pride often plagues elders. In *The Monastic Institutes*, he observes: “Other vices gradually decline and disappear as time passes, ...but in this case long life, unless it is marked by ceaseless effort and wise discernment, is not only no cure, but even leads to piling up new occasions for conceit.”<sup>62</sup> Certainly, pride can be a pitfall for contemporary elders—celibates and others; pride for us is often a flight from the truth of our condition as aging selves and a disdainful dismissal of other people, their help and their wisdom.

Such refusal to accept help and one’s own limitations is brilliantly set forth in Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Stone Angel*. Hagar Shipley, the central character in the novel, is a 90-year-old widow who experiences isolation resulting from her pride and refusal to accept dependence. She resents the encroachments of age and is in no way ready to admit her limitations. “Bless me or not, Lord, just as

60. “Aging,” *Spiritual Life* 26 (1980):18.

61. Sipe, *Secret World*, 253-54.

62. *The Monastic Institutes*, XI, 8, trans. Jerome Bertram (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999), 166.

You please,” she thinks, “for I’ll not beg.”<sup>63</sup> At the end of the novel, as her life draws to a close, she fights off the nurse who is trying to help her hold a glass of water but reflects: “I only defeat myself by not accepting her. I know this—I know it very well. But I can’t help it—it’s my nature. I’ll drink from this glass, or spill it, just as I choose. I’ll not countenance anyone else’s holding it for me.”<sup>64</sup> Letting go of her prideful stance seems impossible to her.

Contemporary culture reinforces the sense that as adults we must stand alone, we must be autonomous. Diocesan priests must be autonomous, we tell ourselves. Our culture encourages us to flee dependency. Yet as it does that, we find ourselves fleeing from a basic truth of our human condition—we are people who are dependent on God and one another. We cannot go it alone. Facing and accepting the limitations that come with aging lead us once again to appropriate this fundamental truth. Rather than own our connectedness and need for assistance we cling, at times, to our own sense of omnipotence. Resistance to our will from intractable forces provokes our rage. With a therapeutic culture telling us that everything can be fixed, we go forth, sometimes in the face of serious, even terminal, illness, with naïve optimism quite different from Christian hope. We thrive on tales of people getting better, stories in which every illness is transitory. Or at the other extreme, our grandiosity leads us to despair, because we sense that if we can do nothing to ameliorate our situation, then we are left to living with no answer and no future—for everything is in our hands or medicine’s. There is nowhere else to look.<sup>65</sup> Quite different to all

63. Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, 1964), 274.

64. *Ibid.*, 275.

65. See Keith G. Meador and Shaun C. Henson, “Growing Old in a Therapeutic Culture,” in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith G.



this is the vision that comes from the Scriptures: “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as they day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps 139:11-12). Accepting our basic dependency brings us into the awareness that we are never alone, that an all-gracious God regards us.

Humility, a truthful recognition of who we are before God, also comes into prominence as aging leads us to deal with shame. Culture and the media have made us all desirous of looking perpetually young and of moving through life as though we are “Energizer bunnies.” Wisdom of accumulated years, grey hair, peaceful serenity are all discounted in a society that seems to value only youth and the latest technologies. Some have pointed out that, even those working to counteract ageism—that pernicious prejudice against elders who are seen in light of a negative stereotype as unproductive, inflexible, and disengaged—end up creating a false impression of aging and elders. The negative stereotype is gone, but the new one suggests that “old people now are (or should be) healthy, sexually active, engaged, productive, and self-reliant—in other words, young.”<sup>66</sup> Thank God for those elders who rejoiced in their elder status and did not clamor to be young again. Humility means recognizing one’s lasting value in God’s sight, a value not determined by how productive we are or how youthful we may appear. Ongoing conversion in connection with aging means staying grounded in who we are, both as people incredibly loved by our God and also as people who have lost some of the beauty, the youth, the productivity that the world prizes.

**Harmonizing: Singing a New Song**

Meador, and David Cloutier (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 90-111.

66. Carole Bailey Stoneking, “Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging,” in *Growing Old in Christ*, 84.

Granted the clergy shortage these days, probably many of us can go on in active ministry for as long as we are physically able. However, there are still adjustments that will be expected as we move into senior status. For celibates, relationships are always important and so it is worth our while to anticipate what sort of relational adjustments we may have to make as we approach those mature years. If our relational abilities have continued to grow and develop in our years of celibate striving, we should be ready to make adjustments. The practice that I am going to draw your attention to does not sound particularly spiritual or religious. It is the practice of harmonizing which we most often associate with singing in a group. Actually, singing in a group could be a helpful activity to keep in mind as we think about some of the adjustments that come with aging.

One of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales called “The Bremen Town Musician” recounts how four animals, a donkey, dog, cat and rooster, have been cast aside because they have outlived their usefulness. These four decide to band together and become musicians in the town of Bremen. On their way to the town, they see a house that was quite literally a den of thieves. The animals put their heads together to plot how to drive out the thieves and have the house for themselves. They arrange themselves with the donkey on the bottom, the dog standing on its back, the cat on the dog’s back, and the rooster on top. When one of them gave the signal, “they started making their music: the donkey brayed, the dog barked, the cat meowed, and the rooster crowed.” They then came crashing into the house through a window and drove out the robbers. An attempt by the thieves to retake the house is similarly thwarted.<sup>67</sup> The tale is clearly about finding a new role in life when

67. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans. Maria Tatar (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 150-155.

old ones are discarded. The challenge now is finding one's own voice and blending with others. The tale mirrors the life of many elders within our communities and our society who have to plot a new course for themselves. In one sense, we are all musicians on our way to Bremen.<sup>68</sup>

Conversion in the senior years, in a sense, can mean changing careers from presider to singer in the choir. The challenge for elder celibates is discovering their own distinctive voice and how best to use it. A further challenge is learning to harmonize with others in one's new or changing role. Communities need to make sure the voices of the elders are heard and are allowed to blend with others to create the community's polyphony. There is a place for both songs of lament and songs of joy in any community. Of course, plenty of opportunity for singing is always found around the Table of the Lord.

This harmonizing tendency may also find reflection in the faith stance that the celibate takes up in life. It can be a deep faith in God and in Church and a faith that is able to see the thread that connects all people of good faith together in a world where most see only division. Love has grown in the celibate so that it is a love that reaches out and strives to gather all together into one unity. The celibate sees now with the eyes of faith and, in the phrase of Gerard Manley Hopkins, sees the "inscape" where all things connect in their source and not just a landscape of discreet objects. James Fowler, in one of his earliest presentations of his faith stage theory, chose a celibate religious as his example of his highest stage, universalizing faith. This individual sees how in each person love is at work, if the person would but follow it, drawing all toward greater union and

68. See Patricia Beattie Jung, "Differences among the Elderly: Who Is on the Road to Bremen?" in *Growing Old in Christ*, 112-128.

harmony.<sup>69</sup> Harmonizing is the means to our goal and together we can produce wonderful music.

### **Giving Thanks – Becoming Eucharist**

Donald Cozzens has said: “Charismatic celibates exhibit a spirit of gratitude.”<sup>70</sup> To that, I would add that the spirit of gratitude grows with advancing years. As elders recall the past, what can result is a thanksgiving for the presence and action of God in their lives. As they process their memories, they find deeper meaning in their lives and hence much for which to be grateful. The lives of elders, in other words, become more Eucharistic as they focus on and recall God’s goodness to them. What also can come into prominence is God’s remembering of us, which is at the very heart of the Paschal Mystery.<sup>71</sup> God’s remembering gives us identity; it is God’s saving activity toward us. In the Eucharist, we are remembering God’s great act of remembering, the One who will never forget us even if we forget God. As God remembers us, so we are to remember God and one another.

Because in the Eucharist we remember God’s remembering, we can live differently, boldly, courageously. In James Joyce’s short story “The Dead” in his *Dubliners*, a husband is despondent as he realizes his wife was thinking not of him as she heard a love song, but of a young man who died out of love for her many years before. This man risked his life and lost it out of love for her. The husband

69. Fowler and Sam Keen, *Life Maps*, ed. Jerome Berryman (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1978): 93.

70. Cozzens, 27.

71. See David Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer’s Disease and the Love of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

reflects: “Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age.”<sup>72</sup>

The Eucharist, as we remember the One who died out of love for us, should make us passionate, passionate for God and all God’s people and ready to feast with them all. Donald Cozzens reminds us that celibates can be among the most passionate of people. “Their passion, uncluttered by the simplicity of their lives and filtered through the strain of contemplative awareness, unmask a thirst for life in its fullness.”<sup>73</sup> As celibates grow older, they may find themselves even more passionate, on fire, for that feast, that communion of all for which we long, as we draw closer to it. One elder saw that as a fitting goal for the celibate life.

Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire?<sup>74</sup>

72. James Joyce, “The Dead,” in *The Dubliners* (New York Modern Library, 1969), 223.

73. Cozzens, 28.

74. *The Wisdom of the Desert*, trans. Thomas Merton, 50.

# 2. At the Intersection of Challenge and Choice: The Threat of Online Sexual Activity to Authentic Celibacy Formation

SISTER DIANE PHARO, SCN

## **Introduction**

At the crossroads where our Church and our technological society converge, discerning adults stand poised at an intersection of challenge and choice. It is a time in our American society of seemingly unlimited access to information, a time when the expectation of instant gratification is prevalent, and the desire for heightened stimulation is strong. It is a time in our Church when the expectation of authenticity, integrity, transparency and fidelity cannot be overstated.

Reconciling the lures of a permissive culture with the call to be open to God's work of transformation demands a disciplined response to the challenges that free the mature person to make respectful and prudent choices. For discerning adults, it is a time of challenge and choice.

## **Society's Influence**

Men discerning priesthood and actively involved in seminary formation today are not immune to the messages and the enticements of the society and culture from which they have emerged into adulthood. They are immersed in a world where boundless information is available via the World Wide Web, a reality

that facilitates with ease endless attempts toward satisfaction of curiosity, desire and perceived need.

Al Cooper and Eric Griffin-Shelley describe an entangled connection between the Internet and sexuality, suggesting that each “fuels and ultimately contributes to the transformation of the other.”<sup>1</sup> Michael Leahy warns that the latest tools of technology are creating a “new sexual revolution with limitless accessibility.” He describes a “world that is increasingly pornographic” with the increased availability of wireless Internet access via cell phones, iPods, etc.<sup>2</sup>

With the rapid acceleration of technological means for producing and engaging in sexual activity, the gathering and reporting of precise and current data is highly challenging. Nevertheless, statistics provide an alarming glimpse into the harsh reality of online sexual activity. As reported by Cooper and Griffin-Shelley, an estimated 20% of Internet users in 2002 were engaging in online sexual activity.<sup>3</sup> Just three years later in 2005, ComScore Media Metrix reported that 40% of Internet users had visited adult sites.

“According to ComScore Media Metrix, there were 63.4 million unique visitors to adult websites in December of 2005, viewing over 15 billion pages of adult content.”<sup>4</sup> Every second, an estimated

1. Al Cooper and Eric Griffin-Shelley, *The Internet: The Next Sexual Revolution*, introduction to *Sex and the Internet: A Guidebook for Clinicians*. New York: Routledge. 2002. 4.
2. Michael Leahy. *Porn Nation: Conquering America's Addiction*. Chicago: Northfield Press. 2008.106.
3. Cooper and Griffin-Shelley. *The Internet*. 4.
4. Mark Kastleman. *The Drug of the New Millennium: The Brain Science Behind Internet Pornography Use*. Power Thinking Publishing. 2007. 3.

\$3,075.64 is being spent on pornography; every second, an estimated 28,258 Internet users are viewing pornography.<sup>5</sup> Mark Kastleman cites reports at [www.max.com](http://www.max.com) and [www.afafilter.com/vitalfacts.asp](http://www.afafilter.com/vitalfacts.asp) of more than 4.2 million separate and distinct pornography websites identified on the Internet with 2,500 new sites appearing online each week.<sup>6</sup>

Clinicians and researchers testifying before a U.S. Senate committee in 2004 described pornography as the new crack cocaine (Wired.com). Kastleman highlights the work of Dr. Judith Reisman, Douglas Reed, and other noted neuroscientists and neuropsychologists whose research findings lead them to describe pornography and its effects as “a drug, a chemical dependency, a form of substance abuse...an endogenously processed poly drug providing intense, although misleading, sensory rewards.”<sup>7</sup>

Douglas Reed likens the “arousal dependence” experienced through persistent use of pornography to the “biochemical alterations associated with excessive amphetamine use.” The “satiating effects” acquired through hours of viewing Internet pornography are compared to the “satiating effects of opiate use.”<sup>8</sup> The risks are glaringly apparent: online sexual activity leads to online sexual problems that can lead to online sexual compulsivity and addiction.

The far-reaching implications of the Internet with regard to sexuality and psychosexual development will continue to impact our society and our Church. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops exhorts priesthood candidates to “appropriate a

5. The Child Protection Guide, 2009

[http://www.childprotectionguide.org/archives/vol2\\_iss9.php](http://www.childprotectionguide.org/archives/vol2_iss9.php).

6. Kastleman, *The Drug of the New Millennium*. 4.

7. *Ibid.* 61-62.

8. *Ibid.* 62.



cultural-critical attitude that discerns the positive and negative potentials of mass communication, various forms of entertainment, and technology, such as the Internet.”<sup>9</sup> Intentional, disciplined and honest efforts in overcoming patterns of behavior, behaviors that in some instances have become addictive, will demand honest appraisal, unwavering challenge and support, and ongoing dialogue.

### **Access, Affordability, Anonymity**

What is it that fuels the acceleration and intensity of online sexual activity? According to Cooper, it is a threefold phenomenon he describes as the “Triple-A-Engine,” the central components of which are “access, affordability, and anonymity.”<sup>10</sup> Ease of access is undeniable. Equally undeniable, yet perhaps not readily recognized or acknowledged, is all that is neglected, un-accessed in one’s life, as a consequence of ease of access to online activities and interactions. Solitude, creative leisure, friendship, ministry, prayer are all too often sacrificed for the ease of online pleasure.

The affordability of online sexual activity is significantly more costly than can be assessed in dollars and cents. The determination, effort, motivation and will required to free oneself from the grip of affordable online sexual activity are costly. The toll on self-worth, self-confidence and self-esteem is a price far too great to wager. Unfortunately, the expense of what, at first glance, appears affordable is significantly underestimated. Equally unfortunate is the enticement of anonymity that provides a false sense of security and confidence in acts of self-disclosure and sexual expression. The intimacy of genuine encounter is compromised for perceived online anonymity.

### **Human Formation**

9. *Program of Priestly Formation*. 5th Edition. Washington D. C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2006. 79.

10. Cooper. *Sex and the Internet*. 5–6. (first reference?)

In stark contrast to the immediate gratification and anonymity of online sexual activity, the work of human formation is a slow, steady, deliberate and disciplined process realized in an intimately personal encounter with God, one's self and others. "The human formation of candidates for the priesthood...fosters the growth of a man who can be described as a free person, a man of communion, a person of affective maturity, and a man who respects, cares for, and has vigilance over his body."<sup>11</sup>

"A free person is a person who is free to be who he is in God's design."<sup>12</sup> In this freedom, there exists the desire and the willingness to be known. In this freedom, there exists the vulnerability necessary for intimacy in relationship. Freedom, however, is not an identifying characteristic of the person who is trapped in the grip of the addictive power of online sexual activity. Neither is it a place experienced as reflective of God's design. Rather, it becomes a world of shame, fear, guilt and loneliness.

"A man of communion is a person who has real and deep relational capacities...capable of making a gift of himself and of receiving the gift of others." This capacity "requires the full possession of oneself."<sup>13</sup> Sadly, for the person caught up in the world of online sexual activity, the freedom of self-possession is sacrificed. The world of online sexual activity does not authentically fit into the life of one pursuing a celibate commitment.

Hence, that reality is sooner or later compartmentalized, relegated to a subconscious compartment, as if somehow neatly tucked away. But not without a terrible cost! The more compartmentalized one is, the more disintegrated. The cost becomes the compromise of integrity. The "inner joy and inner

11. *Program of Priestly Formation*. 76.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

peace” that mark the man of communion are likewise compromised.<sup>14</sup>

A person of affective maturity strives for balance in the integration of feelings, reason and values, living a life “freely enriched by feelings, not driven by them.”<sup>15</sup> Affective maturity is expressed in warmth and caring, empathy and compassion. Affective maturity opens one to “a passionate life of pastoral love and relating” that channels sexual energy in generative ways.<sup>16</sup>

Development toward affective maturity becomes stunted at the place where balance and integration break down, where self-absorption takes hold. The anonymity of online sexual behavior, with its accompanying superficiality of false relationships grounded in fantasy, is no substitute for the mature, generative relationships born of authentic celibate loving.

We celebrate sexuality as a gracious gift of God. We understand sexual energy to be relational, creative energy. As such, healthy sexuality, a fundamental underpinning for celibacy that is authentic, free and loving, is expressed in relationships that are honest, mutual and respectful. “Sexuality finds its authentic meaning in relation to mature love.”<sup>17</sup> The use of pornography, acts of auto-eroticism and other online sexual behaviors are a misdirection of sexual energy and compromise the process of psychosexual development that leads to affective maturity.

“A man who respects, cares for, and has vigilance over his body” is a disciplined man.<sup>18</sup> Discipline requires mindfulness – consistent, faithful mindfulness! In this faithful stance of mindfulness, one

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Stephen J. Rosetti. *The Joy of Priesthood*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press. 2005. 90.

17. *Program of Priestly Formation*. 90.

18. Ibid. 76,

grows in self-awareness, self-understanding and freedom. That which promotes and supports celibate loving is freely chosen. That which diminishes and thwarts the capacity for celibate loving is carefully avoided. Breaking free of habitual or compulsive online sexual behavior will demand a recommitment to living with vigilance and discipline.

### **Challenges to the Goals of Human Formation**

The seminarian involved in online sexual activities faces serious challenges in his formation for celibate priesthood. An honest assessment of the nature and complexity of online behavior – frequency, duration, intensity – is an essential, initial step on the journey toward overcoming online sexual behaviors that are incongruent with an authentic celibate commitment. An honest assessment of desire, motivation and will to engage the hard work of breaking free of online sexual behavior is a necessary undertaking.

Denial is a hazardous defense that blocks growth in self-awareness and self-insight and foils successful behavior change. Denial is sustained in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways in an effort to avoid the stark reality of the dangers and the incongruity of online sexual activity. Patrick Carnes categorizes denial as “global thinking, rationalization, minimizing, comparison, compartmentalizing, intellectualizing, blaming, and manipulation.”<sup>19</sup>

Breaking down the walls of denial opens the door to recovery. Avoiding rationalization and compartmentalization will lay the foundation for honest self-appraisal. Avoiding harsh generalizations and negative judgments about self-worth, well-being, and relationship with God opens one to the grace of conversion and the reality of change.

19. Patrick Carnes, David L. Delmonico, and Elizabeth Griffin. *In the Shadows of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior*. Center City: Hazelden. 19–21.

### **Overcoming Online Sexual Activity**

“Requisite skills for living chastely” are identified in the *Program of Priestly Formation* as “ascetical practice, prudent self-mastery, and paths of self-knowledge, such as a regular personal inventory and the examination of conscience.”<sup>20</sup> Self-knowledge, self-denial and self-mastery provide a firm and essential framework for engaging the work of overcoming online sexual activity. Overcoming an undesirable or problematic behavior or habit requires an understanding of what motivates and reinforces the behavior.

Paul Simpson identifies “seven goals” that motivate and sustain compulsive sexual behaviors: “excitement, comfort, escape, affirmation, power, revenge, and helplessness.”<sup>21</sup> Identifying the ways in which these goals drive online sexual activity will enhance self-knowledge. Courage and honesty are required. Self-denial and self-mastery born of prudence, discipline and endurance lay the groundwork for facing the challenges.

Which of these goals are legitimate needs that can and ought to be met in mature and healthy ways that promote authentic celibate loving? Which of these goals serve only to mask unresolved hurt and pain in need of reconciliation and healing? Only with courage and honesty will these questions be confronted and resolved. Only then will informed, deliberate choices direct the way out of self-destructive online sexual activity toward personal, affective maturity and healthy, celibate relationships.

Self-knowledge, self-awareness and self-insight are, of course, necessary but not sufficient for modifying behavior. Strategies that facilitate successful recovery from online sexual activity and other compulsive sexual behaviors have been identified by a number of authors. Simpson highlights the significance of self-care. “Physical,

20. *Program of Priestly Formation*. 79.

21. Paul Simpson. *A Resource Handbook for Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviors*. Amedco LLC. 2003. 1-2.

spiritual, emotional and relational self-care” are essential for “building and maintaining” personal, inner strength.<sup>22</sup> It is self-care grounded in balance.

Behavioral changes directed specifically to Internet use include “reducing access, reducing anonymity, and reducing objectification.”<sup>23</sup> In this way, healthy online habits are developed, and the Internet is used solely for healthy, constructive purposes. Simpson encourages the identification of “violations” and recommends constructing a list of “Don’ts” to which one commits: I will not view pornography on the Internet; I will not engage in fantasy; I will not withdraw into isolation when lonely.

Building a realistic and useful list of “Don’ts” will necessitate taking an honest, in-depth, personal inventory. In addition, Simpson highlights the importance of establishing “boundaries”: boundaries for dangerous places and people, boundaries for the Internet, boundaries for television viewing, boundaries for movies and DVDs, and boundaries for whatever toxins need to be avoided.<sup>24</sup>

Developing the skills essential for acquiring healthy online habits and adhering to the boundaries and parameters necessary for avoiding dangerous and toxic situations will serve as secure guideposts on the road to recovery from online sexual activity. This will not, however, be sufficient to nurture and sustain a meaningful and generative life of celibate loving that far surpasses the fleeting pleasure and instant gratification sought in the hollow void of online sexual behavior. The man discerning priesthood and actively involved in seminary formation is challenged to “fashion his sexual

22. Ibid. 3.

23. Patrick Carnes, David L. Delmonico, and Elizabeth Griffin. *In the Shadows of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior*. 123-125.

24. Paul Simpson. *A Resource Handbook for Treating Compulsive Sexual Behaviors*. 1-2.

desires and passions in such a way that he is able to live a healthy, celibate lifestyle that expresses self-gift in faithful and life-giving love.”<sup>25</sup>

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops identifies “certain habits or skills that are necessary instruments on the path to effective and healthy celibate chastity.”<sup>26</sup>

Among these habits or skills is appropriate self-disclosure, a cultivated capacity for self-reflection, an ability to enter into peaceful solitude, ascetical practices that foster vigilance and self-mastery over one’s impulses and drives, and a habit of modesty. An especially important practice is holding all persons in the mystery of God, whether they are encountered in the course of formal ministry or ordinary life.<sup>27</sup>

The acquisition and integration of these habits and skills shifts the focus from a view of the restrictive, self-absorbing limits of what needs to be avoided or harnessed to the freeing “yes” of celibacy that is yes to living life with passion and zeal for the reign of God. Energy formerly expended in the endurance of celibacy is transformed in the embrace of a commitment to faithful celibate loving.

### **Living with Freedom and Integrity**

In the declaration made prior to ordination, decisive words of understanding and freedom are proclaimed. “Especially I swear that I understand the implication of the law of celibacy and that I freely embrace it and will keep it faithfully with God’s help until the end of my life.” This understanding and freedom are firmly grounded in the knowledge and integration of one’s sexuality and sexual desires

25. *Program of Priestly Formation*, 94.

26. *Ibid.* 93.

27. *Ibid.* 92.

and the “acceptance and valuing of one’s sexuality as a good to be directed to God’s service.”<sup>28</sup>

We read in John’s Gospel of Jesus’ call of Nathaniel, whom Jesus regards as a “man in whom there is no duplicity” (John 1:43). Mastering the lure of empty sexual enticements and breaking free from the grip of online sexual activity conquers the duplicity contained therein. An honest and disciplined response to the challenges posed by online sexual activity opens the way to an honest and free choice in embracing the commitment to faithful, celibate loving.

28. *Ibid.* 93.



# 3. Celibacy and the Transformation of Culture

REV. GUERRIC DEBONA, OSB

One irony of modern living is that never before have we been better connected, yet never have we witnessed such intense fragmentation in the human subject. We are able to communicate from Chicago to Hong Kong in seconds, but survey after survey indicates that people are dissatisfied with their jobs, their marriages—the very shape and destiny of their lives. Disintegration seems to be a kind of watch word for our postmodern age, manifested in such socially dysfunctional problems such as Internet pornography, endless addictions of every sort and the collapse of family structures.

With the loss of communal values and support, the suicide rate of young people each year climbs to an alarming rate, while the elderly feel ghettoized and abandoned by the very society they helped to build. Racism and unjust immigration laws, an anxiety about the future of the economy, baffling questions about our foreign involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan are only a few of the symptoms of a culture that seems to suffer more and more each day from joylessness, despair and alienation.

The Church's role in the difficulties of the contemporary age is both crucial and transformational. The magisterial document *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council opened its lines with words that might have been spoken today: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys

and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, “the split between the Gospel and culture is undoubtedly the drama of our time,” according to Paul VI.<sup>2</sup> Such a gulf may be healed only by the abiding presence of the Paschal Mystery, Christ living and working within His people.

As a witness to this Paschal Mystery, priestly celibacy remains an extraordinary gift and sign for the Church in the modern world, a primary and necessary instrument for evangelization, healing and growth. All Christians are called to holiness, all Christians to a radical Gospel. Holiness is fostered in the “manifold counsels” proposed by Our Lord in the Gospel to His followers. In a unique way, “outstanding among them is that precious gift of divine grace which the Father gives to some men (cf. Mt. 19:11; 1 Cor. 7:7) so that by virginity, or celibacy, they can more easily devote their entire selves to God alone with undivided heart (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-34).

This total continence embraced on behalf of the kingdom of heaven has always been held in particular honor by the Church as being a sign of charity and stimulus toward it, as well as a unique fountain of spiritual fertility in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Celibacy exists, then, for the sake of Christ and his Church, as an eschatological sign of the world to come, as a witness to the Incarnate Word made flesh who emptied Himself so that we may have life.

If celibacy discloses a unique window on the Gospel for our time, its contemporary interpretation has distorted its primary signification with Christ’s gift of self. True enough: the “sex

1. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott, SJ (New Brunswick: New Century Press, 1966), 199.
2. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975) 20. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html)
3. *The Documents of Vatican II*, 71-71.

scandals” that broke in the news in January of 2002 has caused the drama of “the split between the Gospel and culture” to grow wider in the popular imagination. At the same time, American society does not really have a clue into the depth of celibacy or its profound meaning in the world.

We know that popular culture has rarely depicted priestly celibacy as an authentic witness, even in the 1930s and '40s, when films like *Boys Town* (1938) or *Going My Way* (1944) and *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945) (the latter two both tops at the box office for their respective years) depicted priests without much in the way of human development or desire, but simply as instruments of paternal concern. Spenser Tracy's Father Flanagan or Bing Crosby's Father O'Malley were probably effective characters precisely because they were patriarchal figures, empty of the distractions of human passion.

But after the 1960s, almost the opposite occurred, in which priests like Dick Van Dyke's Father Rivard in *The Runner Stumbles* (1979) were seen as dark pits of hidden passion, capable of acts of sexual aggression and possibly murder.<sup>4</sup> Overall, it should not surprise us that the representation of priestly celibacy in culture has served neither the Church nor the world that it is meant to change. These priestly depictions have less to do with evangelization and transformation and more about American mythology and a misreading of Catholicism through a largely Protestant (and secular) lens.

So how does priestly celibacy transform contemporary culture? For the remainder of this essay, I would like to inject a little realism

4. c.f. Gueric DeBona, OSB, “Mass Appeal: The Priest Movie as Cultural Icon,” *New Theology Review*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (August 2004): 30-40; and “Angels with Dirty Faces: Priestly Images in Contemporary Cinema,” *New Theology Review*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (May 2009): 60-69.

into the discourse on celibacy and culture by suggesting three ways in which celibacy functions as an instrument of renewal. I will propose that there are at least three signifiers of celibate chastity that might be antidotes to the cultural malaises in our culture and reflect briefly on their significance for us today. I call these a witness to generativity, a sign of kingdom building and hope for community.

### **Celibacy as a Witness to Generativity**

Generally speaking, we have extracted much of our western attitudes about sexuality, courtship and marriage from a long tradition of culturally inscribed narratives. In what is perhaps the most famous opening line in English fiction, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* quietly announces the fate of the human heart: "It is a truth generally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Ranging from troubadours singing their lovesick ballads to their maidens in France during the Middle Ages to American films noir celebrating *l'amour fou* in the dark rainy streets of New York in the 1940s, the stories we tell each other teach us how to behave.

We are still living in the shadow of 20th-century storytelling, a tradition that has been more or less shaped by a kind of quasi-Freudian narrative, a trajectory that has only underlined a kind of Romantic or medieval courtly love tradition in more explicit ways. It is now not a question of whether a man of good fortune would be in want of a wife, but that he encounter an outlet for his natural sexual desires. Pop Freudianism entered the culture especially after World War II and was given a lot of credibility with the results of the Kinsey Reports on sexuality in the human male and female (published respectively in 1948 and 1953). Contemporary Hollywood cinema absorbed the middle-class American cultural attitudes on sexuality in a variety of ways, producing melodramas like Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), which suggested that repressed sexual desire leads eventually to uncontrollable behavior and insanity.

Is it any wonder that folks are meant to feel incomplete unless

they are in a sexual relationship? Yet far from finding fulfillment, the search for the ideal mate or the perfect orgasm has led to anything but happiness, because such longing has not embraced the true meaning of sexuality: generativity. Celibacy, a life free from genital activity, offers a generative life, a powerful sign to a culture that is itself often dead and fruitless. In a certain sense, the Judeo-Christian community is confronted with the reality of generativity from the first moments of the Bible. God, who creates the world out of nothing, does so without a consort. Thus the pattern of creation, indeed the love from which the Son was begotten, is mysteriously made manifest. Generativity echoes God's own creation of the universe and occurs wherever genuine love is present.

Jesus himself promised this endless, creative love to Peter when He said that "there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come" (Mk 10:29-30). Surely Jesus was reminding Peter that those who surrender everything do so because of love and that it is this sacrificial reality which becomes generative for the human family. The apostle's query to Jesus finds a contemporary voice when celibacy confronts cultural objections. As if to remind all of us of the paradox that this surrender of everything leads to fruitfulness and a multiplication of familial relationships, Our Lord adds the sign of contradiction: "many that are first will be last, and the last will be first" (31).

As always, Christ shows Himself to be the premiere physician of the soul, even as He points to the foundations of human development. Centuries later, Erik Erickson would speak of generativity as establishing a legacy for the next generation and its personal appropriation crucial in the evolution of the self in

society.<sup>5</sup> As a generative agent for the Gospel, priestly celibacy engages evangelization by its very nature, since it seeks to establish the “next generation” of witnesses. Celibate generativity longs to pass on to parishes, schools—the world at large—a harvest of good works where charity can live and find a true home.

Celibate generativity calls out to the workers in the vineyard to reap abundantly because the Master is near and ready to return. Celibate generativity fosters Gospel values of faith, hope and love as cornerstones to the newness of life as lived by Jesus. As John Paul II reminds the Church, the gift of self is intimately linked to the ongoing love of Christ for the Church. “Pastoral charity is the virtue by which we imitate Christ in his self-giving and service. It is not just what we do, but our gift of self, which manifests Christ’s love for his flock.”<sup>6</sup> When celibacy is lived authentically, its complete gift of self to the Church patterns itself on Christ, the only begotten Son, whose Paschal Mystery discloses the witness *par excellence* of generativity: the resurrection.

### **Celibacy as a Sign of the Kingdom**

John Gast’s painting, *American Progress* (1872), allegorically depicts an angelic-like representation of Columbia as America, (imagine an enormous Victorian lady in an off-white flowing nightgown in the Swift’s Land of the Lilliputians) moving westward

5. See Erikson’s classic work, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959).
6. John Paul II, Homily at Eucharistic Adoration in Seoul, October 7, 1989, quoted in *Pastores Dabo Vobis: On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstance of the Present Day*, Post-Synodal Exhortation, March 25, 1992, 23. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031992\\_pastores-dabo-vobis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis_en.html)

across a wide prairie, weaving a telegraph wire, carrying a book and steadfastly chasing tiny terrified Native Americans out of her path. The term “Manifest Destiny” was first used in 1845 to refer to the annexation of Texas, but the interest in expanding and owning property has been a pervasive myth, not only of the American frontier, but of the American way of life.

If Americans once saw themselves as the New Israel, which God led through the wilderness into the promised land of western expansion, then their commitment now was to a kind of secular shrine to the homestead. As the intrepid Alexis de Tocqueville remarked on one of his visits to America, “In no other country in the world is the love of property keener or more alert than in the United States.”<sup>7</sup> Not coincidentally, then, Americans have been raised to revere private ownership, especially for the land, which also has had its logical and deadly consequences in imperialism and colonialism across the globe.

Yet the Gospel would have it otherwise: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides” (Matt 6:33). Jesus asks that those who live the Christian life do so single-mindedly and without compromise for worldly ambition and personal economic gain. Priestly celibacy clearly and unambiguously articulates what St. Benedict calls the “good zeal,” a preference for nothing else but Christ, the true King. This celibacy is a witness that there is no earthly substitute for the kingdom promised by Jesus, a reign that will come at a time known to God alone.

Therefore, the longing for early powers or lands or ideologies that eclipse the vision of the kingdom are obfuscations of God’s righteousness. Toward the end of Matthew’s Gospel, we can see the result of righteousness as well as the collapse of that virtue. Those sheep destined to inherit the kingdom have disposed themselves to

7. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London: Penguin, 2003), 742.

see Christ in everyone in need: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the ill, the imprisoned. Since celibacy is a complete surrender of the self as gift, the celibate priest is uniquely positioned to be present as Christ for those in need. Then the celibate who is available for the poor, who is himself poor in spirit, will have no trouble recognizing the Lord in one of the least in the kingdom.

Being available for others continues to be a *raison d'être* for priestly celibacy, but I believe that we should see this disposition for others as a sign that the kingdom of God is typified by the one who bids the Word welcome, as one who lives by the existential hospitality of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matt. 5:3). The celibate who signifies the kingdom is opened to radical listening, waiting like a wise virgin for the bridegroom to appear. Pre-eminent among Christians who humbly welcomed the Word was the Mother of God. The Church reveres the Virgin Mary as a singular vessel in the history of salvation because it was her hospitality to God’s Word that made our redemption possible. Therefore, she who heard the Word of God and kept it was before and ever after a virgin, a sign once again that the kingdom of God has been made known to God’s people.

When celibacy is viewed as a sign of the kingdom, it confronts a society obsessed with material gain and global, colonial expansions. “He has cast down the mighty and lifted up the lowly,” says Mary in her *Magnificat*. Modeled after Mary of Nazareth, the Virgin who waits in confidence for the kingdom of God and its righteousness, the celibate priest becomes a living embodiment of one who makes present God’s Eternal Word, even as he awaits that kingdom that is about to come; his celibacy signifies the well-known expression from the Letter to the Hebrews: “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come” (13:14).

The implications and demands on justice are enormous when we realize that no human power can take upon itself a “manifest destiny” that promises an abiding city of abundance and even



excess. As Pope Benedict has said in the encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, “A link has often been noted between claims to a ‘right to excess,’ and even to transgression and vice, within affluent societies, and the lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction, and elementary health care in the areas of the underdeveloped world and on the outskirts of large metropolitan centers.”<sup>8</sup> Celibacy for the sake of the kingdom is a living reminder that the future of humanity lies not to entitlement to excess and that our treasure is in heaven, while we help to build the Kingdom of God’s Justice and Peace on earth.

### **Celibacy as Hope for Community**

“Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in a well-known sermon on “Self-Reliance” he preached in 1830. “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the world.”<sup>9</sup> In a certain sense, Emerson was setting the tone for American individualism, the force of which has remained as constant as the lone Western hero on the Dakota plains. Walt Whitman would chant the “Song of Myself” in 1855, an unbridled celebration of the American individual and its power to harness, rather than embrace, community: “I am large; I contain multitudes.”

The trumpeting of the self would appear in countless manifestations in American culture over the years, some of them as urgent calls to recognize the potential of individualism as constitutive of true human leadership and who Thomas Carlyle would call in another context “Captains of Industry.” In 1950, David

8. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2009), 66.

9. *Reading on the Themes of Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, edited by Robert N. Bellah et al (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 58.

Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, a seminal sociological study of middle-class sensibility, determined that "other-directed" persons severely compromise the American legacy of autonomy, a value imbued with "inner-directedness."<sup>10</sup> Conservative Republican President Ronald Reagan would champion the success of individualism in American life in his first inaugural address: "If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before."<sup>11</sup>

But for St. Paul, true power is disclosed not in the construction of the self or personal genius, but in the power of divine self-emptying, in the sacrifice of Christ's cross, which has delivered all humankind into the realm of the Father's love. Christ, the firstborn of the dead, has given us the social and ecclesial community of the Church, filled with His Spirit. Christ's free gift of Himself to us has brought forth the life-giving community of love. While some might read celibacy as a participation in American individualism, nothing could be further from the truth.

Celibacy exists for the sake of the other. We model not the lone star western hero, but the work of Christ when we offer our "bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." Paul goes on to urge, "Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom. 12:1-2). The locus of priestly celibacy establishes itself here, at the cross of Christ, which becomes the fountain of self-giving for the celibate building community, a source that he encourages all to imbibe.

In a very real sense, the day-to-day ministry of priestly celibacy

10. David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1965).

11. *Ibid*, 407.

functions as a matrix for the sacraments building the Church in love. Celibacy symbolically stands at the edge of culture so that it might be a kind of fulcrum for those in need of God's mercy; celibacy is not as some abstract idea, but the reality of self-giving love put into the practice of pastoral care. Simply stated here, we might point to priestly celibacy as it bears concrete witness to the life of Christ in the sacramental world of the Church.

Consider, for only a brief instance, the role of the priest at baptism. He initiates the neophyte from the world of darkness into the light of Christ, claiming the newly baptized for Christ and His Church. Then again, with the other sacraments: in Eucharist, the priest brings the disparate, fragmented world of individuals into community, the life-sustaining nourishment of the Body of Christ; in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, he once again stands on the margins of sin and forgiveness, offering to bring the penitent into a world of God's grace; in the Sacrament of Anointing, he extends God's healing power to the suffering, and to the dying, he offers viaticum—food for the final journey.

The celibate priest is a mystical ferryman taking those stranded in the Underworld of sin and death into the promised land of God's mercy. To this end, priestly celibacy enfleshes pastoral charity, even as it builds community for the sake of the Gospel of Christ, carrying the People of God to the Promised Shore. Celibacy, like the cross of Christ, becomes the potent foundation for community, signifying a liminal world of transition made possible by the saving work of the Son of God. As John Paul II says, "Jesus Christ, who brought his pastoral charity to perfection on the Cross with a complete exterior and interior emptying of self, is both the model and source of the virtues of obedience, chastity and poverty which the priest is called to live out as an expression of his pastoral charity for his brothers and sisters."<sup>12</sup>

The degree to which celibacy will transform culture is the extent

12. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 30.

to which that virtue is embraced freely as an imitation of Christ. Christ is already at work renovating our world as a generative, sustaining presence in the arms of the Church and its members through a multitude of vocations. Christ is already the singular sign of the kingdom that is to come, the God who is with us here and now and the Bridegroom at the end of time and history awaiting His Church. Christ is present to us as hope, even as His Spirit labors to bring to restoration all things in the Father's will.

Priestly celibacy participates in the living, redeeming work of Our Lord as a vibrant witness to the Body of Christ and as a manifestation of divine grace disclosed in mystery in our lives. Ultimately, it will be Christ the Bridegroom who gathers all things to Himself, recapitulating and restoring all creation that groans and awaits completion. A joyful, self-giving celibacy is the Bride who awaits Him; it witnesses powerfully to the very act of re-creation, a final paradox to a culture that longs for fullness of life and length of days.

# 4. Celibacy as a Calling, Sign and Gift: Reflections of a Newly Ordained Monastic Priest

REV. CHRISTIAN RAAB, OSB

In true Benedictine spirit, the compiler of this volume invited me to author this piece so that the musings of a “younger member” (*Rule of St. Benedict*, 2) might be included with the wisdom of the elders. And while at 35, I can no longer pretend to belong chronologically to the youngest generation of priests and monks, I offer as my credentials the fact that I only professed solemn vows in 2008, and was just ordained a priest in 2009. I do therefore hope that my humble ponderings will be a small contribution to this otherwise venerable book.

My only instruction for this essay was to say something about my own journey to celibacy without being “too personal.” While that last qualification may be important for sparing readers the suffering of exposure to a confession, I must admit that it would be hard for me to imagine a more difficult task than writing about this subject from a disengaged distance. What, exactly, could be more personal than a reflection on a choice one has made about his sexuality?

To help me along, therefore, and to give this essay the advantage of being more universal, I have chosen to look at celibacy through the lens of some personal heroes: St. Augustine, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope John Paul II and St. Therese of Lisieux. I will attempt to link the lives and insights of these “celibacy experts” with my own experience of being drawn to celibacy. My hope is that, in this process, I will be able to share the value I have discovered

in celibacy, and in that, perhaps, support others as they try to understand this mysterious practice. So, without further ado...

### **St. Augustine and Celibacy as a Unique Calling**

After his discussion with the Pharisees on marriage and divorce in chapter 19 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus responds to the disciples' suggestion that perhaps it is better not to marry by saying "not all can accept this word, but only those to whom it is granted" (Mt 19:11). Later, St. Paul, in taking up the question of whether Christians should marry says: "Indeed, I wish everyone to be as I am, but each has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another" (1 Cor 7:7). An important truth flows from these two scripture passages; while celibacy is not in any way normative for Christians, it is a gift or calling given to some.

This elicits some natural questions. Are celibates special people? Are they a spiritual elite? Are they wired differently? Do they have sexual thoughts? How does one know if one has this calling? Obviously, I cannot answer all these questions, but I believe that the life of St. Augustine is informative here. He has helped me a lot in understanding the mystery of celibacy as a unique calling.

The last time I read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, I was profoundly struck by the famous conversion scene in the garden. By the time of its occurrence, Augustine has already been through much in his spiritual journey. Morally, Augustine has moved from what we take to be liberal promiscuity to a stable relationship with a common law-wife to, finally, an engagement with another young woman.

Intellectually, Augustine has also moved. After deep involvement with Manichees, Augustine has been freed from materialism by an engagement with Neo-Platonic philosophy. By the time of the garden scene, Augustine has moved even further, to acceptance of the truth of scripture and enrollment in the catechumenate. Lastly, Augustine has matured emotionally. Augustine has moved from early immature emotional dependence on a peer group to mature companionship with other truth seekers, his friends, Alypius and Nebridius. Augustine, by the time of the garden scene, was a far

cry from being the degenerate he once was. He was well on his way to becoming a Christian.

It seems that by the time of Augustine's great conversion, the only obstacle left to entering the Church was the obstacle of celibacy. That may seem strange to us, but I believe Augustine sensed a calling to celibacy and that he knew if he finally handed his life over to God, he was going to have to face this part of God's plan. To explain this, it is necessary to look more closely at his writings.

There are hints of Augustine's celibate vocation long before he enters the Church. Augustine remembers fondly, if with a little ambivalence about his over-attachment, his deep friendships as a young man. He describes them as such:

The charms of talking and laughing together and kindly giving way to each other's wishes, reading elegantly written books together, sharing jokes and delighting to honor one another, disagreeing occasionally but without rancor, as a person might disagree with himself, and lending piquancy by that rare disagreement to our much more frequent accord. We would reach and learn from each other, sadly missing any who were absent and blithely welcoming them when they returned. Such signs of friendship sprang from the hearts of friends who loved and knew their love returned, signs to be read in smiles, words, glances and a thousand gracious gestures. So were sparks kindled and our minds were fused inseparably, out of many becoming one.<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Augustine shows a remarkable appreciation of a moment of happiness in his old life, a life he otherwise quite famously looks back upon with some disgust. It is clear that Augustine experienced a deep sense of communion in his early friendships. Notably, he does not write this way about his sexual relationships or, apart from his fond descriptions of his mother,

1. St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, OSB (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 65.

his family of origin. His most profound experience of intimacy as a young person came in the context of a group of friends. This appears to me to be an early sign of the desire for a celibate common life that Augustine would long hold in his heart.

As Augustine moves closer to baptism, his desire for life in an intentional community emerges more strongly. After befriending Alypius and Nebridius, they start to plot about adopting a monastic lifestyle. Augustine writes: “We almost made up our minds to live a life of leisure, far removed from the crowds. We would set up this place of leisurely retirement in such a way that any possessions would be made available to the community and we would pool our resources in a single fund.”<sup>2</sup> When Augustine becomes betrothed, Alypius, recognizing that this plan would run contrary to their shared dream, challenges him, for, in the event of marriage, “it would be impossible for us to live together in carefree leisure and devote ourselves to philosophy as we had long desired, and still desired, to do.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the dream of living in celibate community is on Augustine’s mind and in his heart. It appears to be his deepest desire.

It is quite telling that Augustine experiences a mini-crisis when Ponticianus arrives and tells the story of St. Anthony, as well as the stories of two men who broke off betrothals in order to accept the life of virginity. To this point, Augustine hadn’t imagined his dream a realistic possibility. The stories told by Ponticianus challenge Augustine’s assumption and are experienced by Augustine as coming from God. Augustine prays: “Even while he spoke You were wrenching me back toward myself, and pulling me round from that standpoint behind my back which I had taken to avoid looking at myself. You set me down before my face.”<sup>4</sup>

2. Ibid., 112.

3. Ibid., 110.

4. Ibid., 149.



Augustine sounds like a number of men, myself included, during the dark hours of vocational discernment. After simultaneously dreaming of and trying to deny the calling, the Lord puts the example of someone else responding before one's eyes. The unrealized dream returns, a sense of being haunted endures, and one realizes that he must face himself, face his deepest desire to live as he is meant to, or never be who he is really meant to be.

As is well known, Augustine had been, all along, struggling with continence, and this seems to have been the major obstacle to conversion. However, we must not make the mistake of thinking that Augustine saw sexual relations as incompatible with being Christian. Augustine himself mentions several times that he esteemed marriage and saw in it a valid way to order one's sexual urges. He also saw it as a real calling in the Church.<sup>5</sup> Why couldn't Augustine have entered the Church and be married, as even his mother Monica dreamed?<sup>6</sup> What seems likely is that Augustine, in avoiding baptism, was also avoiding a celibate monastic vocation, the real desire of his heart. He was avoiding entering the Church because entering the Church was going to force a decision about that vocation. He did not truly desire marriage, but neither did he feel willing or able to say yes to a celibate life. However, a celibate life was his true calling in the Lord, so entering the Church meant, in some sense, saying yes to that calling.

It is important to note that before the moment in the garden, Augustine had been stuck in a push-pull cycle. He writes: "When I was making up my mind to serve the Lord my God at last, as I had long since purposed, I was the one who wanted to follow that course, and I was the one who wanted not to. I was the only one

5. *Ibid.*, 161.

6. *Ibid.*, 112.

involved. I neither wanted it wholeheartedly, nor turned from it wholeheartedly. I was at odds with myself.<sup>7</sup>

Augustine is describing a struggle with vocation. It was a struggle not so much to accept the truth of the faith, which Augustine had long ago done, but a struggle to accept himself and his particular calling to “serve the Lord.” He describes himself as being “at odds with myself.” He has conflicting desires, is going through a deep interior battle and is facing disintegration.

I suspect that what happened in the famous garden conversion scene was that Augustine received the grace and the courage, through the encounter with the Word of God, to finally obey his inner voice. His decision to finally enter the Church then was, not surprisingly, accompanied by announcements to his mother that he would not marry,<sup>8</sup> and to Verecundus that he would be forming a celibate community.<sup>9</sup> The final scenes of the first part of the *Confessions* are of Augustine and others living in that community, giving themselves to friendship and prayer. Augustine’s conversion, then, was also, and perhaps mostly, the acceptance of a vocation.

There are two aspects of Augustine’s story that I believe celibates can relate to. I will call them the divine element and the human element. By the divine element, I mean that Augustine’s celibacy is a real calling. It is not just something Augustine comes up with on his own. He is invited to it by God, who prepares Augustine, provides him with experiences that teach him where his deepest happiness will lie, supports him with friends who share the same dream and actively leads him to this life choice. By the human element, I mean that Augustine had to work through his own freedom, his own fears, his own suffering, discovering those parts about himself that were

7. *Ibid.*, 153.

8. *Ibid.*, 157.

9. *Ibid.*, 161.

integrating and those which were not, and finally obey God's voice in the deepest part of himself.

Personally, I feel I can relate to Augustine's story because my own sense of being called to celibacy was made known to me through experiences of friendship as a young man, particularly in a youth group. It was in these circumstances that I felt most alive, most in communion with others. When I was single in these situations, I sensed a greater availability to others, a greater potentiality for deeper intimacy with more people. I could also see that I was most generous in this modality. Like Augustine, celibacy and community, for me, seemed to go hand and hand. The more into communion I entered, the more I wanted to be celibate; the more celibate I allowed myself to feel, the more I felt in communion with others. There is a mystery in that, a beautiful one!

However, like Augustine, I didn't have the strength or faith on my own to choose such a life. In fact, it scared me deeply! While my family was supportive, I had fears about what others would think and I had serious doubts about my own potential to live in such a way. Furthermore, the idea of sacrificing marriage and family was painful, and I resisted it.

What made it possible for me to go further was that I was strengthened by meeting people, monks and nuns (and here I see God at work through the Church), who practiced this kind of life and showed me it was possible. Eventually, I met a particular community where my own vocation made sense and which I wanted to join. All the while, and most importantly, I started living closer to Christ, actually praying, frequenting the sacraments, getting involved in the Church. That gave me the grace to go further, to finally say yes, a yes that has brought me great peace.

Still, celibacy is a sacrifice. To pretend otherwise is to live in an illusion. I have heard it argued that if celibacy seems too difficult, it probably isn't a genuine call. I accept that there are those who experience the celibate life as only a frustration, and were that the case, it would surely be a bad sign. However, I am convinced that for those for whom it is a genuine call, it still comes with struggle.

Augustine teaches us that the fact that it is a struggle cannot be taken, on its own, as an indication that one isn't called.

The struggle is there because it is real. It is a real sacrifice of a real good. Perhaps there are exceptional people for whom celibacy fits like a glove, but I am convinced that for many, if not most of us, chaste celibacy is learned, as it was for Augustine, through no few hardships. But if one is called, and if one does not accept, as we see so clearly in Augustine's hesitating days, the result can be an experience of disintegration.

I shared with Augustine the struggle to accept this unique calling. I had the benefit of seeing the goodness of my parents' marriage, of the marriages of my elder siblings, not to mention my grandparents. Furthermore, I didn't enter religious life until I was 28, and so I had had my own experiences of dating and being in love with good people who could have been happy matches. Saying yes to celibacy meant saying no to that in order to be in a different kind of communion. It meant saying no to what I knew to be a good. It meant choosing one set of dreams over another. But as long as I hovered in indecision, as long as I held back the sacrifice, I was not following my deepest desire. I was holding back my life.

My brothers joke with me that, when I am around my eight nieces and nephews, I am getting my "celibacy booster shot." It's a funny joke that suggests that being around screaming children ought to make me appreciate the fact that I can hand them back to their parents. I'd be lying if I said I didn't appreciate the independence I have that is hinted at in their jibe. But celibacy is also something to suffer in that respect. It means I don't have children. It means I don't have a wife. It means I don't have a natural family. It means I have said no. In order to say yes, I have said no. No is a sacrifice. I have to be aware of that, and life provides me many occasions for that very awareness.

The late Basil Cardinal Hume, OSB, has written: "At the heart of celibacy there is always pain. It has to be so, because the celibate

lacks something vital.”<sup>10</sup> In forgoing marriage and family, the celibate has a pierced heart. For Hume, this pain makes “space in the heart for many and not just one.” It is, says Hume, “an example of the divine paradox that we must die in order to live.”<sup>11</sup>

I like these words because they speak to my experience. In saying no, I have said yes. The sacrifice has been brought a sublime reward. Because of my choice, I am able, like Augustine, to live in a special kind of community, one that is dedicated to seeking God and serving the Church. Here I am blessed to have time for prayer with God, to live with friends, and I enjoy ministry opportunities that I once only dreamed about. It is rewarding, too, to see the way my community touches the lives of those with whom we come in contact, offering them a place of peace and renewal. It is a great privilege to be a part of it all. I am happy in this life and grateful to have received a celibate calling.

#### **Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope John Paul II and Celibacy as a Sign**

I believe that one day, if they don't already, people will look back and recognize Mother Teresa and John Paul II as the greatest saints of the 20th century. As one who came of age in the 1980s and '90s, I can count myself among the great number of people who were inspired and formed by their witness. These two figures contributed in great ways to my understanding of celibacy as a sign.

The idea of celibacy as a sign is of particular importance. Many times when people are trying to understand the practice of celibacy, they look for a practical value. This is how it is often sold: “Priests wouldn't be available for people in the same way if they had a family

10. Cardinal Basil Hume, OSB, *Searching for God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 52.
11. Basil Hume, OSB, *Light in the Lord: Reflections on Priesthood* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 34-35.

to tend to.” I find this argument only partly convincing. If we are talking about *quantitative* availability, it is a tenuous claim. There are many doctors and police officers, for example, who have as much responsibility to those outside their family as do priests. We don’t argue that they ought to be celibate.

Furthermore, there are many Protestant ministers, rabbis and imams out there who are married and do a fine job in their ministry and manage to balance it well with family. Finally, as a monk (and a diocesan priest might argue otherwise), I can’t really argue from this practical standpoint. There are simply many things I am not available to do because of the demands of my community. There are many ways I would like to be there for people, but cannot. However, if we are talking about *qualitative* availability, then I think celibacy has something to offer, and it is in this sense that it helps to understand how celibacy is a sign.

#### *Mother Teresa and Celibacy as a Sign of Solidarity*

Mother Teresa, it is well known, took as her special call, the words of Matthew 25; “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). Everything in her life and ministry testified to the truth she saw in this Gospel. She saw the face of Christ in the poorest of the poor and she fed, bathed, clothed and held Him in them while they were dying. I think if you would have asked Mother Teresa where Christ was in her life, she would have told you, without hesitation, that He was in the poor.

But if those of us who were looking at the many images of Mother Teresa’s work were asked where Christ was, we would probably have more immediately said, “He is in that ugly old nun who is taking care of those people.” The world saw Christ in Mother Teresa. She, perhaps more than anyone in the 20th century, was a sign of Christ’s presence among us. She made it possible for us to believe in the reality of the body of Christ, the Church, as the real, and not just metaphorical, presence of Christ. Where Mother Teresa was, we could see, Christ really was. She was a sign of incarnate love. In fact, she said as much about her missionary work: “I believe that God

loves the world through us. Just as He sent Jesus to be His love, His presence in the world, so today He is sending us.”<sup>12</sup>

I believe that Mother Teresa’s celibacy brought an important dimension to her work with the poor. Her celibacy meant that she was poor like them. She was in solidarity with them. “At the heart of celibacy is always pain,” and because we know that the celibate nun is incomplete, she has this pain. She is, therefore, not just a helper of the poor, she is one of the poor. This brings a different dimension to what she is doing. She does not just image the Christ who comes to rescue. She images the Christ who has shrunk to the depths and taken on human suffering. He does not only ease suffering, He goes through it with those who suffer. She writes:

Jesus had to become poor to be able to be one of us. He had to become small, He had to become weak, He had to become helpless, He had to become dependent, He had to become lonely, to feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for.... And I think this is what we are trying to do...to be that small one, that helpless one so that we can be able to proclaim the good news that God loves the world.<sup>13</sup>

It is true that very few celibates work in the slums reached by Mother Teresa and her sisters, but for every celibate, the choice of renouncing marriage and family puts us in solidarity with those who suffer incompleteness, material or otherwise. Celibacy is, in that sense, a form of poverty.

Ronald Rolheiser notes that celibacy is a special way of being in solidarity with the many people in the world who are single involuntarily. He writes:

There is a real poverty, a painful searing one, in this kind of aloneness. The poor are not just those who are more

12. Mother Teresa, *Words to Love by* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1983), 27.

13. *Ibid.*, 26.

manifestly victimized by poverty, violence, war and unjust economic systems. There are other less obvious manifestations of poverty, violence, and injustice. Celibacy by conscription is one of them.

When Jesus went to bed alone he was in solidarity with that pain in solidarity with the poor. Sexual inconsummation, whatever its negatives, does this for us, it puts us into a privileged solidarity with a special kind of poverty, the loneliness of those who sleep alone, not because they want to, but because circumstance denies them from enjoying perhaps the deepest human experience that there is.<sup>14</sup>

Celibacy, then, is a very special sign of the cross. It is a way of saying, with Christ and without words, “I am with you,” to those who suffer, in loneliness or in any other way.

On my own journey to celibacy, I was attracted very much to this aspect of the vocation. I remember times in high school when I was able to support someone emotionally. I particularly recall going to the hospital to see a friend who had a head injury and another whose father was ill. I remember wanting to share in some way their pain. I remember those moments as occasions when I felt called to celibate priesthood. It seemed like a natural way to be profoundly available to those who were suffering.

Similarly, I also recall the many times when I needed the help of a priest or nun for my own support. I was touched by the way they seemed available to me, not so much because they had nowhere else to be—I know they often did have somewhere else to be, but because, in their celibacy, they were already where I was. I knew their celibacy was a cross, and I was finding myself on a cross. Through them, the Lord had put Himself on a cross next to mine.

*John Paul II and Celibacy as a Sign of Hope*

What Mother Teresa has spoken by the example of her life, John

14. Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 210.



Paul II has put into thoughtful words. In his well-known *Theology of the Body* and in his many pastoral treatises, Pope John Paul II articulated a profound understanding of celibacy as sign. John Paul invited us to view the body in sacramental terms, with a theological meaning of its own. At the basis of his work is the truth that human persons are made for communion, a fact which meditation on the human body, with all its parts, reveals. John Paul takes it that this design is part of humanity's being *Imago Dei*. Since God is Trinity, a communion of persons, our participation in communion, nuptial or otherwise, is how we reflect the image of God.

As such, it makes sense that John Paul calls marriage the "primordial sacrament."<sup>15</sup> For it is the most basic and human experience of communion. John Paul emphasizes that its sacramental meaning is that it is a profound sign of Christ's love for the Church. Lived well, marriage reveals that God's love is free, faithful, full and fruitful. Celibacy is also a sign of Christ's love. As the married person represents this love of Christ in relation to their spouse, the celibate represents it in relation to God and Church.

However, there are some important nuances. First, John Paul agrees with what has already been said about celibacy as a special sign of solidarity with the poor. In his apostolic exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, he states that the consecrated life "helps the Church remain aware that the cross is the *superabundance* of God's love poured out upon this world, and...is the great sign of Christ's presence, especially in the midst of difficulties and trials."<sup>16</sup> Secondly, celibacy must be more than solidarity with suffering. It must be a sign of hope.

John Paul locates the meaning of consecrated celibate life in

15. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, Pauline Books, 2006), conf. 96.

16. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* 24.

Christ's Transfiguration. In fact, he calls the religious an "icon of the Transfiguration."<sup>17</sup> This is so because the consecrated celibate has been called up the mountain with Christ into deep intimacy with the Holy Trinity in order to be conformed completely to Christ and sent out again. The transfigured face of Christ in glory is given so that the Church "can be confirmed in faith and to avoid being dismayed at his disfigured face on the cross."<sup>18</sup> The celibate, then, must not be just a sign of compassion, of "suffering with." He or she must be a sign of union with God and the hope and joy that lies there.

Importantly, the Transfiguration is a preview of the Resurrection, and the celibate is called to be a sign of "that eschatological fulfillment towards which the whole Church is tending."<sup>19</sup> John Paul is, of course, drawing on the long tradition of associating celibacy with eschatology. Christ has said "at the Resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven" (Mt 22:30). The celibate, then, is a sign of what we will all be someday in glory, bodily persons living with absolute fulfillment in community with God and one another, but with the conspicuous absence of sexual union and procreation.

John Paul sees this aspect of the sign of celibacy as being so important that he says: "It is the *duty* of consecrated life to show that the Incarnate God is the eschatological goal towards which all things tend, the splendor before which every other light pales and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart."<sup>20</sup> As an eschatological figure, the celibate witnesses to the fact that created things, however good, are insufficient, and that our ultimate hope is in the resurrected life. The celibate is a living reminder of the resurrection.

17. *Ibid.*, 14.

18. *Ibid.*, 15.

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

20. *Ibid.*, 16.

The advantage, it seems to me, of focusing on the Transfiguration rather than the Resurrection is that, while the Transfiguration is an image of the resurrected Christ, it is a sign “out of time.” Every celibate this side of heaven knows that he is not yet in the kingdom, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. But the Transfiguration admits of a certain entry into “eternal living” on this side of things. And because the story ends with “coming down the mountain,” it highlights that the experience of communion with God is not just for ourselves but to provide hope for all who “are weeping in this valley of tears.”

On my own spiritual path, I was greatly moved by monastic men and women who had something of the Transfigured face. College was, for me, a time when I could have easily drifted out of the Church. Thankfully, I went on some retreats and met some monks and nuns who seemed to me to be the happiest people I had ever met. They were joyful and free. It struck me considerably that these very people who had renounced so much were shining so brightly. Their secret was God and they were not afraid to tell me so.

If God could bring that much freedom, that much peace, and that much joy, I wanted to draw nearer. I have spoken already of the value of the solidarity of these men and women with me in suffering, but if it were not for their also possessing this prospect of joy in the Lord, their witness would have meant much less. They were icons of hope.

With all this talk about celibacy as a sign, I think it is evident why the habit has been an important expression of my celibacy and why I believe it is important to many Catholic religious of my generation and those younger. For many, it is decisive in the choice of a religious community. It is true that the habit does not make the monk and that external symbols can never make up for interior mediocrity. Similarly, there are many holy men and women religious who don't regularly wear a habit and their interior goodness is undoubtedly more important than the donning of the cloth.

But it seems to me that Catholicism is a very symbolic religion and that Our Lord was often doing symbolic things. A habit is an action that speaks louder than words. For a married man, a ring is a sign

to the world of his commitment, his fidelity to wife and family. For a religious, a habit says something to the world about one's most fundamental commitment, about the primacy of God in one's life. The habit communicates, too, without one having to say anything verbally, the suffering of the cross and the hope of resurrection.

To end, in the final section of *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul mentions that the celibate is also a Marian image of the Church as virgin and bride of the Lord. In the celibate, we see the undivided gift of self to God as a spouse, who makes the celibate fruitful and maternal toward souls.<sup>21</sup> To unpack this last aspect of celibacy, I will turn to my final "celibate hero," St. Therese of Lisieux.

### **Therese of Lisieux and Celibacy as a Gift**

In Therese of Lisieux, we see something of the opposite of a St. Augustine. Where Augustine dreads and struggles with what he realizes to be his deepest dream, Therese embraces it from an almost incomparable young age: "I've longed to give myself to God ever since I was three."<sup>22</sup>

Therese grew up in a pious 19th-century French family. She was the youngest of five sisters, all of whom entered religious life, with four, Therese included, landing in the same Carmelite convent. Therese, coming early to her sense of vocation, had to combat the reasonable adults in her life who wished her to wait until she was a bit older before taking the habit. In her well-known autobiography, she explains how she had to convince her father, the Carmelite superior and the local bishop that she was ready. In a famous scene, while at the tender age of 14, she boldly petitions Pope Leo XIII in person to advocate on her behalf.

Everyone has childhood dreams. Therese's dream was to be a saint, to give herself to God with an undivided heart, to win other

21. Ibid., 34.

22. St. Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, trans. John Beevers (New York: Image, 2001), 65.

souls to God and to one day be with God in heaven. She wants to be God's "plaything,"<sup>23</sup> His "prisoner"<sup>24</sup> and His "bride."<sup>25</sup> She goes so far as to design a wedding invitation announcing the marriage of Christ Jesus to "little Therese Martin," with almighty God and the blessed Virgin Mary as hosts!<sup>26</sup> For most modern readers, this all smacks a bit sentimental, if not fantastic, at first glance.

But reading Therese, and precisely because she is unapologetic about her desires, one finds that one is led into wanting the things that she wants or, rather, wanting the one that she wants. One discovers that what she wants is a very human thing, to be so in love with God and so loved by God that nothing else matters but to become His partner in redeeming the world. In that, I think, one discovers what celibacy, or any vocation for that matter, is really about.

For Therese, though, the whole thing is based on a deep sense of being loved by God. When Christ promises the kingdom, she hears it as a promise to her.<sup>27</sup> When Christ offers Himself in Holy Communion, she experiences it as a unique and personal gift to her.<sup>28</sup> What Christians have had proclaimed so often that it no longer seems like "news," Therese understands and receives in its fullness as a fresh message meant for all, of course, but also uniquely for her. Therese so absorbs the truth of "God so loves the world," that for her, the only way to respond is with the small gift of her whole self. "I have sought and I have found the way to ease my heart," she writes, "by giving you love for love."<sup>29</sup>

23. Ibid., 78.

24. Ibid., 37.

25. Ibid., 95.

26. Ibid., 99-100.

27. Ibid., 76.

28. Ibid., 28.

29. Ibid., 162.

I have already reflected much about celibacy as a sacrifice, but Therese has added to my understanding that this sacrifice is not first for the sake of ministry, or for the sake of my getting to be a particular way in community or my getting to live a particular ecclesial vocation. For Therese, the sacrifice is, above all, a sacrifice of love to God. It is akin to what brides and grooms do when they publicly proclaim that they will forsake all others for the good of the one. The sacrifice is a gift. She writes:

You know, God, that I have never wanted anything but to love You alone. I long for no other glory. Your love has gone before me from my childhood, it has grown with me, and now it is an abyss whose depths I cannot plumb. Love attracts love and mine soars up to you, eager to fill the abyss of Your love.<sup>30</sup>

My folly is to hope that Your love will accept me as its victim; my folly is to rely on the angels and saints so that I may fly to You, my adored eagle, with Your own wings. For as long as You wish, I will stay with my eyes on You. I want to be fascinated by Your gaze. I want to be the prey of Your love. I hope that one day you will swoop down on me, carry me off to the furnace of love, and plunge me into its burning depths so that I can be its ecstatic victim for all eternity.<sup>31</sup>

This is spousal mysticism at its finest. Therese is the bride of Christ, the spouse of God, a victim of love. It is in reflecting on lives such as her that John Paul has written, “what in people’s eyes can seem like a waste (celibacy) is, for the individuals captivated in the depths of their heart by the beauty and goodness of the Lord, an obvious response of love.”<sup>32</sup> And who said celibates could not be romantic?!

30. Ibid., 151.

31. Ibid., 165.

32. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 104.

Therese, who has known God's unique and personal love, offers herself as a gift to God. God rewards that gift with yet another gift. He makes Therese His partner in redeeming the world. Therese suffers sickness and spiritual darkness for the last few years of her short life, but she understands and accepts her trials as part of being conformed to Christ. Meanwhile, she devotes her life of prayer and ordinary good deeds as intercession for the world.

She is, in fact, increasingly consumed by the passion of Christ, which has become her passion. She is as thirsty as he is for the salvation of souls.<sup>33</sup> She is so to the point that she is willing to suffer for them. For this reason, Therese, who never left her French Carmelite cloister, has been named the patron of all foreign missions. In a real sense, Therese has received her promise. She has become a spouse of Christ and mother to His children.

Therese is an example to me. She reminds me of the unique and personal love that God has for us all. She models the gift of the available and undivided heart that God yearns for, and she shows me that God will reward that gift by allowing a share in His mission. On my own journey to celibacy, and in my continued growth along that path, she has been a special friend and mentor.

In the Benedictine life, to which I belong, we express our celibacy as a gift at solemn vows. To me, the special moment is the act of prostration. The act of prostration takes place after one has placed his signed vows on the altar. As such, they are an offering to God taken up in the Eucharist. Before lying prostrate, the monk sings with the community, "Uphold me O God, and I shall live, and do not confound me in my expectation."

It's a fitting preface. Celibacy is a gift to the God who has already loved the monk this far along the way. The monk will not persevere alone. He will need the support of others who are trying to make the same gift, and he will need the continued grace of God. After the prayer, the monk lies flat on the cold marble floor, becoming

33. *Ibid.*, 53.

one with God and Church. Over him is draped a funeral pall, and the death bells ring. It looks, at once, like death and sex. As such, it's a pretty good image of celibacy.



# 5. Friendship: Some Large Ideas and Some Practicalities

REV. HARRY HAGAN, OSB

Aristotle writes that friendship is “one of the most indispensable requirements of life” (451), and he does not overstate its importance. While this topic holds many possibilities and complications, this little essay will consider friendship as it relates to seminarians in their formation for the Catholic priesthood. The first part will survey what some, and only some, important thinkers have said about friendship. The second part will offer some practical comments.

## **Part I: Some Large Ideas about Friendship**

### **Aristotle’s Three Foundations for Friendship: Usefulness, Enjoyment and Goodness**

Aristotle’s discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ch. VIII) forms the starting point for basically every discussion of friendship in the West. Beginning with goodwill and mutuality, he defines friendship as a matter of mutual goodwill. We can direct our goodwill toward many and wish them good, but just because I feel goodwill toward another does not make the other person a friend. The goodwill must be mutual. If the other person does not recognize and return the goodwill, there is no friendship, even though we may dearly wish for it. Friendship depends upon mutuality.

This mutual goodwill has large and ample boundaries. It includes mutual care, mutual respect, a desire for the other’s happiness, a sharing of opinions and ideas in conversation, a trust that brings self-disclosure and shared experiences. Some friends carefully define and limit these boundaries, while other people continually expand beyond the initial expectations. These are often gathered

into the larger idea of love, but friendship is only one of the possible love relationships.

For better or for worse, we are born into a family. While people sometimes reject these relationships, they remain a fact that cannot be changed. For most of us, the fact of family ties becomes our initial experience of love and a continuing source of a love upon which we can depend unconditionally because of the fact of family. While some friends may become like or even more than brothers and sisters, friendship is created and must be continually recreated, or it will come to an end. We can say, "I was once his friend," but we cannot say, "I was once his brother." An important difference.

Likewise, friendship is different than marriage in which a man and a woman join themselves in love by a public vow to one another before God and the community. Marriage stands as a public and legal institution that protects the primacy and exclusivity of this relationship of love. Friendship is not a public or legal institution, but a private relationship that depends upon the goodwill and character of the friends. Though friendship may reveal and promote a fierce loyalty and love, it depends upon the ongoing goodwill of the people. Married people who do not feel any affection for each other are still married. Friends who no longer share mutual goodwill (for whatever reason) are no longer friends.

Aristotle defines three sources for the goodwill of friendship: usefulness, enjoyment or goodness.

Sometimes people recognize what the other can do for them, how they can be mutually useful to one another. We find this in work and business relationships. A certain amount of reciprocal goodwill helps an office work together, and so I may find myself anxious to return a favor because of what you have done for me. Likewise, in choosing a plumber, I may ask a plumber-friend or a friend of a friend to do the work because I expect their goodwill to make a difference in the quality and honesty of the work.

People get themselves into trouble when they mistake goodwill for usefulness. No matter how much goodwill the plumber has, I expect the job to be done competently. Better a skilled plumber

than an incompetent friend when it comes to plumbing. In these situations, justice, Aristotle's beloved virtue, has more to offer. Still, all things being equal, we prefer to engage with people with whom we already have some basis for mutual goodwill.

Some people provide an endless flow of witty and interesting conversation. We enjoy being with them because we can count on a good time. So Aristotle names enjoyment as the second source of friendship, and he believes that this defines friendship especially for the young, "since the young guide their lives by emotion and for the most part pursue what is pleasant to themselves and the object of the moment" (iii.5; 461).

Aristotle objects to this type of friendship because its regard for another is not grounded in "the good," and so these friendships of pleasure depend upon the flow of the pleasing conversation and the like, but when it stops or ceases to please, so does the friendship.

According to Aristotle, of course, "the perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue." Since virtue is a permanent quality, "it is those who wish the good of their friends for their friends' sake who are friends in the full sense, since they love each other for themselves and not accidentally" (iii.6; 461).

Aristotle believes such friendship rare because such people are rare. Such friendship also requires close interaction over time (iii.8). While they may find each other useful and enjoyable, the foundation of their friendship is virtue and goodness. In nurturing these friendships, one should look for the good, for what transcends the moment and serves not just me, but my friend and others as well.

Generally speaking, Aristotle represents the classical ideal of ancient Greece, and Cicero communicates this ideal to the Latin and Christian world in his *Laelius de Amicitia*. Some would argue that he adds little or nothing to Aristotle, but Cicero gives these ideas great force in just the way he writes, and so his *De Amicitia* had an important impact on both Augustine and Aelred, as we shall see.

Like Aristotle, Cicero concerns himself primarily with perfect friendship and defines friendship as "a perfect conformity of

opinions upon all religious and civil subjects, united with the highest degree of mutual esteem and affection” (*De Amicitia*, 6). The idea of “perfect conformity” sets a high bar for friendship, and one may even question whether it is necessary or even desirable—a question we shall return to later in this essay.

### **Basil the Great and the Lord’s Great Command to Love**

Rather than friendship, the Bible mainly uses the metaphors of family—father, mother, brother, sister—to describe our relationships to one another and to God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls upon us not only to love our neighbor as ourselves, but even to love our enemies (Matt 5:43-44). According to this command, love must not be preferential or selective. As a result, Basil the Great, in an ascetical discourse for monks, makes the command to love all an absolute:

The law of charity does not allow particular friendship or exclusive groups in community life, for particular affections inevitably work great harm to communal union. Consequently, all should regard one another with equal affection and one and the same degree of charity should prevail in the entire group.<sup>1</sup>

Although St. Basil’s command for “equal affection” honors the law of love found in the New Testament, it runs contrary to our human experience, which reveals a range of affection. The ideal, as expressed here, seems artificial. In part, St. Basil insists on this ideal because he recognizes how “particular friendships,” as he calls them, can divide a community and cause some to feel like insiders and others like outsiders.

Still, this solution goes against the grain. Realistically, members

1. Basil the Great, “An Ascetical Discourse” in *Ascetical Works*, trans. Sr. M. Monica Wagner, CSC (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press 1962), 207-215, esp. 213.

of a community must recognize that they will be closer to some than others. At the same time, a spirit of openness and charity must prevail to avoid divisions. Even though it is unreasonable to expect to be a good friend of everyone, our friendships should be open to including others. When we experience being excluded, we understand St. Basil's insistence.

**St. Augustine and the Joining of Human Friendship to the Divine**

While St. Basil represents the radical Christian command to love all as oneself, St. Augustine joins the tradition of Aristotle and Cicero to the Christian call to love. Although Augustine did not write an essay specifically on friendship, he deals with the topic throughout his writings, as Sr. Marie Aquinas McNamara, OP, has demonstrated in her book *Friends and Friendship for Saint Augustine*. She sees the summary of Augustine's conception of the love of Christian friendship in his words: "He loves his friend truly who loves God in him, either because God is in him or in order that he may be in him."<sup>2</sup>

Love for Augustine becomes the very reason for friendship and its primary duty (222). Sr. Marie argues that the hallmarks of Augustine's understanding of love are a tested confidence in the friend, an honesty that makes the friendship stronger, and prayer: "Wishing all good things for each other and knowing God to be their greatest good, friends do all they can to bring each other closer to God" (226).

For Augustine, then, the Christian understanding of love does not run counter to the classical ideal, but rather completes it. Well aware of human frailty, Augustine recognizes that our own heart is hidden from ourselves and so we are at a loss to explain it completely to another. Moreover, being human, we continually

2. Sr. Marie Aquinas McNamara, OP, *Friends and Friendship for Saint Augustine* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1964), 223 citing Augustine's Sermon 361,1.

confront our own finitude and also that of others. We must not judge others or expect more than is humanly possible. Only with patience and understanding can we preserve our friendships and “guard the unity of mutual friends” (230).

Though the classical ideal limited friendship to a few, Augustine wished to extend its reach to as many as possible. Augustine then gives friendship the same reach as Christian love. He recognizes that it goes out more readily to some, more slowly to others, but it reaches even our enemies, for whom we are commanded to pray.”<sup>3</sup> In this way, Augustine holds together the classical and Christian ideals of friendship.

### **Aelred of Rievaulx’s Spiritual Friendship**

In *Friendship and Community*, Brian Patrick McGuire carefully traces the development of friendship in the monastic tradition, and he calls the Cistercian Reform, which began in 1100, “the Age of Friendship.” This culminates with Blessed Aelred of Rievaulx, whose two most famous works are *The Mirror of Charity* and *Spiritual Friendship*, written at the request of St. Bernard. Like Augustine, Aelred depends heavily on Cicero for his inspiration:

Spiritual friendship, which is what we mean by true friendship, should be desired not with a view to any worldly good nor for any reason extrinsic to itself, but from the worthiness of its own nature, and the feeling of the human heart, so that it offers no advantage or reward other than itself. (*Spiritual Friendship*, I.45)

This friendship excludes every vice and becomes the holiest of goals for Blessed Aelred (II.9). The marks of this friendship are four (III.61):

1. *fides*—faithfulness
2. *intention*—intention, by which he means what the other wants

3. *Ibid.*, 232 citing Augustine’s Letter to Proba, Letter 130, CSEL, 54-55.

from the relationship

3. *discretio*—discernment, which allows a friend to grasp what is at stake and what needs to be done
4. *patientia*—patience, which allows one to be corrected and to stand fast in adversity

All of these must be tested and proved true to arrive at a true friendship. Even so, the most basic truth of friendship for Blessed Aelred was its spiritual reality. As McGuire says:

Aelred provides the fullest medieval unification of the two great commandments of love. In his life and writings, he sees nothing to fear when one sets forth on the path of friendship with other members of the monastic community. Because God is also friendship, loving the friend in the context of community means also loving God. (298)

#### **Thomas Aquinas and Friendship with God**

Although Aristotle saw many problems arising when those who were not equal sought to become friends, Thomas Aquinas argues for a friendship between those most unequal—a friendship between ourselves and God. Paul Wadell has argued that friendship stands at the very center of the life of God because “the perfect mutuality of love between Father and Son is the Spirit of Love.” The Trinity, then, is a friendship between Father, Son and Spirit.

This life of love is perfect and, therefore, God’s beatitude or happiness is perfect. God offers this love (*caritas*) to us and thereby offers us friendship, which gives us a share in the eternal happiness of God. This love, as Thomas says, is “infused by the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father and the Son.”<sup>4</sup> God has initiated this friendship by the free gift of love. According to Thomas, grace plays

4. Paul Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 122-123. He cites specifically the *Summa Theologica* II.II.24.2.

the crucial role that allows us to transcend our human limitations and to participate in the supernatural and so to become friends with God (124-126).

The importance of participating in this friendship of God, as Wadell points out, “is to be changed according to it, gradually to be remade according to the Spirit of Love” (127). For Thomas, this “is the task and fullness of the Christian moral life” (127) and so brings us perfect happiness and union with God, which is “the highest possible development proper to a human being” (128). Friendship with God, then, is not a luxury, but the crucial activity in our becoming fully and truly human.

### **A Reflection on the Tradition**

A further exploration would take us on to Emmanuel Kant and Søren Kierkegaard, but this abbreviated survey provides enough to begin thinking about friendship. Taking their lead from Aristotle, these writers focus on the ideal of friendship and so hold friends to an exceedingly high standard, which is closely linked to the perfection of love. While this clarifies what lies at the heart of friendship, much of what we call friendship lacks this clarity and simplicity. Moreover, the freight of love in our culture can overload what we take as ordinary friendship.

Some people designate many people as friends—people with whom they would never go with on a vacation or disclose much about themselves personally. Still, they call them friends and are happy to give them their business, chat with them after church or come to aid in real need. For these people, friendship embraces a wide range of people.

Other people are more careful about whom they name as their friends. Even so, these people do not measure up to the ideal presented by Aristotle and the rest. Indeed, Aristotle has such high standards that he says candidly that friendship in its “fullest and best form” is rare (8.8.7-8). While that may well be true, most of us have to find friends with those who are not “absolutely good,” and the people who make friends with “me” find themselves in the same



boat. Most of us are still in process, and good friends can help to make us better persons.

If we wait to find “absolutely good” people to be our friends, we would have to become “absolutely good” ourselves. The best friend that we can be is the person that we are becoming. While we have a right to expect the same from our friends, more than that is a blessing. While we should strive to be better, Blessed Aelred’s insistence on patience may prove crucial.

Although Aristotle classifies “useful friendships” as less than ideal, many people value friends because they are useful—especially as someone to whom we can talk to openly. Good friends know us well, and so are not surprised when we say this or that. Good friends have a history and so a context in which to understand us. If we come up short, they make allowances or offer some counsel or just name the problem.

When they tell us a hard truth, the best part of ourselves knows we must listen because a friend cares about us. Sometimes they just listen to us go on about something until we can figure it out for ourselves. They also create a comfortable space where we can be ourselves, because we are both known and accepted as we are. The masks that we wear for others can be hung on the wall. And we do the same for them.

Friends, then, are different than spiritual directors or psychological counselors. Those relationships are not mutual. The spiritual directors and counselors maintain a professional distance that allows them to offer us an objectivity along with their expertise. They keep their own issues to themselves. Friendship, on the other hand, depends on the mutual give and take that allows people to share experiences together.

In the second part of this essay, I want to offer some practical observations that I initially generated off the top of my head. I do not claim that they are complete in any way. They are meant only to be helpful.

***Part II: Some Statements about Friendship (in no particular order):***

## 1. **We minister to everyone, but we choose our friends.**

People who feel called to the ministry of the Church have a great desire to help and care for people, yet there are some things that we, as ministers, cannot do for others. Sometimes people come to us in need of friendship, and they want us to become their friends. However, friendship is not a ministry, and no one can demand it from us. As a minister or priest of the Church, I must minister to everyone who comes and offer them the ministry of Christ as best I can. They have a right to my Christian love, but this is not the same as friendship.

Often, people will tell us their personal story because they trust us, and we should listen as well as we can and respond appropriately. However, this does not mean that we must or should share our lives with them in the same way. Indeed, if we are ministering to them, we would transgress the boundaries of ministry. They have come to receive whatever the Church can offer them through our ministry. However, we should not complicate their lives with our problems. Here there is a very clear issue of boundaries.

With peers—fellow seminarians or priests—the situation can be more complicated, because we typically reach new levels of friendship by sharing more and more with each other. Even so, no one has a right to my self-revelation. They may invite me, but I may refuse if I do not feel comfortable for whatever reason. My self-revelation should be my gift to another. Just because a peer has shared himself does not mean that I must do the same. If a peer would insist on it, one should become very wary, for this is a type of manipulation that has no place in friendship, which is marked by a mutual give and take.

Certainly, we find people in the course of our ministry to whom we are drawn, and we may, in fact, become friends with them. Perhaps the most important fact in these cases is simply the recognition that I am becoming friends with a person in this

ministerial context. At that point, I need to ask whether I can be true to my role as a minister while developing this friendship.

As a seminarian or priest, my first responsibility must be to my vocation. For priests, the general rule runs that you should not be friends with your parishioners. It is a good rule. However, where a parish is distant from family and other friends, it may not be very practical. Still, one should proceed with care.

Some people like to be friends with the priest or seminarian; it is a sign of status. If this is too much the case, then it becomes a bit awkward. Other people, however, are able to respect our vocation while allowing us to be ourselves as well. These people are a grace. Even so, as a public person (and a priest, and even a seminarian, is always a public person), you must ask yourself how others will interpret this. While public opinion is not the only consideration, it cannot be ignored, both for our sake and for that of the other person.

Often, friendship with married people involves a friendship with both people, but sometimes we find ourselves closer to one than the other. Still, we should be on good terms with the other, and the boundaries of the friendship should be absolutely transparent to everyone. If everyone is not comfortable, then it may be that you have to let that friendship recede.

## **2. Hospitality can provide the beginning of a new and different friendship.**

Hospitality requires more than the offer of food and shelter; it demands an openness to the stranger, to those who come from the outside. The ancient world held hospitality as a great law, and it became a particular mark of the *Benedictine Rule*, which calls for the guest to be received as Christ (RB 53.1; Matt 25:43). Hospitality does not fear the unknown, but stands ready to meet Christ.

Some people receive our hospitality thankfully and go on their way. For others, the gracious gift of hospitality becomes the beginning of new friendship, perhaps someone we would not have

chosen. We become too comfortable with our old, predictable friendship, and new friends stir the pot. So hospitality, with its openness to the stranger, holds the possibilities for a different friendship.

**3. Often friendship grows slowly and builds over time, but sometimes it just appears.**

Sometimes, we meet a person and immediately take a liking to them, and they to us. This is surely one of the happiest experiences we can have. Even so, people need space and time to take in the many facets of the other person. Some personalities make a good, initial impression, but are found to be self-absorbed the more we are with them. As Blessed Aelred emphasizes, friendships must be tested because they depend on trust, and only time provides the space for trust to grow.

Some of the best friendships actually get off to a slow start. The other person seemed, at first, too different to become close, and so we consider them just acquaintances. However, one day we realize that this different person has come to mean more to us than we expected, that they have, in fact, become a friend.

**4. You can't force friendship.**

Sometimes you want to be good friends with someone, but they do not want to—for whatever reason, which is their prerogative. So you are not good friends. While people may find this hard to accept, it is just part of the reality of making friends. Certainly, we can ask ourselves if there is something that we need to change in ourselves, and we can try again. However, if it does not click, we just need to move on.

**5. Friends in need may need more than friends, but still they need a friend.**

Friends typically play an important role in helping their friends get

through tough times. They listen, give advice and mainly provide support. In these situations, we must not assume responsibility for more than we can do. As a friend, we care deeply about them and are willing to make sacrifices for them, but we have given up our objective eye. Sometimes we serve our friends by helping them get in touch with others who can offer them an objective eye or some needed expertise.

Even so, the test of friendship is often adversity, and good friends see their friends through difficult times. Good friends are faithful. Just being there is important, and we may need to act on behalf of our friend as we can. When things are tough, people are not always themselves, and people remember their friends during the hard times.

**6. The boundaries of chastity and celibacy should always be clear to everyone involved.**

Unfortunately, our society tends to imagine all relationships moving toward some sexual expression. This creates a climate of suspicion that can make everyone uptight. When the boundaries of celibate chastity are clear, then everyone can relax and be themselves. Indeed, a number of people seek out seminarians and priests as friends, because the clear boundaries bring great freedom and trust. These boundaries have concrete implications, which should become second nature.

When boundaries are not clear, people become defensive, suspicious and withdrawn. Seminarians and priests always have the responsibility of making sure the boundaries are clear. Being as clear as we can about our own sexuality is the foundation stone here. This understanding provides us with the ability to direct and moderate this fundamental force within ourselves as we seek to form chaste, celibate and life-giving relationship with others.

**7. Strong feeling comes with friendship, but men often have a hard time acknowledging and expressing these feelings.**

Friendship often evokes a strong sense of esteem and care, of admiration and love. At moments, we rightly feel the strength of these emotions and seek appropriate ways to express them. Typically, women find it easier to give “a little hug” that expresses friendship. Men generally have a more difficult time both acknowledging and expressing these feelings, especially with other men.

Among those called to ministry and priesthood, one finds many sensitive and caring men who, because of their formation, are in touch with their feelings and give them greater value. American culture, unlike Mediterranean cultures, does not offer much range for expressing these feelings. The fear of appearing effeminate or homosexual plays a role in this as well. As a result, seminarians and priests can find it difficult to identify appropriate ways to express these deeper feelings.

While it is more common for American men to embrace these days, much depends on whether I, as a man, feel comfortable with these expressions and whether everyone is clear about what is being communicated. A warm handshake and smile may express the moment better than an awkward embrace. Still, a nice, strong, manly embrace can communicate much if everyone on board.

Sometimes men express their deep regard for one another by teasing each other. This can be gentle fun, but it can also develop into a buried hostility “all in good fun.” While some of this is part of the male ethos, at times it is important for men to express their regard for one another directly. There are ways to express feelings without becoming gushy. Telling others directly why we appreciate and value them is always appropriate.

Marking important events with cards, keeping in touch by phone or inviting others to share something—these have their place, and they should bring appreciation and be returned. Whatever the signs, all friends need clear and periodic marks of friendship.

## **8. We often need different friends for different parts of our life.**

Seminarians sometimes search for a friend who will share everything with them. Although they would deny it, they are looking for a kind of spouse—someone who is there all the time. Celibates do not have spouses. If a person needs one relationship to anchor them, then they should leave the seminary and pursue that. Even so, this idea of a person who will share everything is very idealistic or mostly unrealistic. Married people typically have friends beyond their spouses, because the other person does not enjoy doing everything their spouse does. They have friends to play golf with or to talk about books or whatever. This is normal.

Celibates often have different friends for different aspects of their life. Certainly, good friends do things with each other just to spend time together. So they go to the art museum or the baseball game and enjoy it because their friend so enjoys the art museum or the baseball game—not because it is their thing. Still it is nice to go to the art museum or the baseball game with someone who shares your enthusiasm, even if they are not your closest friend.

**9. Some friendships are just for a time, but we should still give ourselves to the moment.**

For the philosophers, true friendship endures, and for St. Thomas, this only reaches its fulfillment in eternity. However, some good friendships appear for a time and then recede. Many school friendships fall into this category. When people move on after graduation, the friendship tapers off.

There is a tendency to say that these friendships were not true and deep to begin with, but that runs contrary to my observations. While some have maintained and developed their friendships after graduation, many have not. The distances and new responsibilities and newer friendships make it hard to continue the relationship. I do not believe that this makes them any less important.

Rather than worry about the future, people should give themselves, as best they can, to whatever friendships appear in the moment, because these constitute our life here in the present. If we

attend to the present, the future will take care of itself, whether by providing ways to continue old friendships or by bring us new ones.

Some friendships come to an end, even though we do not move away. People change; new concerns come to the fore. Views on religion or politics or something else may become too divergent to bridge. The little wounds that come from just being alive must be healed up and reconciled, lest they take their toll and undermine the friendship.

Sometimes a friendship breaks because of human frailty or sin, and surely everything should be done to bind up that breach. Still, people may grow apart little by little and realize one day that they are just not as close as they once were. One friend may feel the loss more than the other, and there may well be something to grieve. Some, of course, will want to restore things to their earlier harmony, but usually it becomes a matter of finding some new harmony, if possible, or facing the reality of the present.

Schools have reunions to remember the good times and to catch up. While important, remembering is not the same as being an ordinary friend. Though we may pretend for old time's sake, we need to accept the present and move on.

## **10. Friends keep confidences.**

When someone comes to us for ministry and shares intimate parts of their lives, it is clear that they expect us to keep their self-disclosure confidential. Friends, on the other hand, talk about all kinds of things—some of which are public and some private. We must be able to recognize the difference and keep the confidences of our friends. Breaking confidences with friends at least derails the friendship and may wreck it completely.

Knowing where the line falls can be complicated. Some people are very open and share themselves rather freely. Others are more private and expect that their friends will keep their conversations in confidence. Both approaches can represent a reasonable stance. However, those who like to share themselves freely must be



attentive to the wishes of those who are more private. Certainly, we should defend our friends forthrightly, but in general we should let them speak for themselves.

**11. Since friendship is mutual, both must work at the give and take.**

Like all relationships, both parties must give time and attention to maintaining and developing the friendship. This is not a matter of strict justice in which I do something and you do something in return. Still, both must participate. If one person does most of the work, the mutuality is lost, and anger sets in.

While some people are introverts, they can still develop and use social skills. Among some people, the mark of a gentleman includes being a good conversationalist—someone who can ask and show interest in another person’s world, can offer an informed opinion about topics of general interest, and can contribute to the give and take of a conversation.

Conversation reveals more than information; it shows emotion and care. Those who object to casual conversations in the name of seriousness are blind to large pieces of life. At the same time, those who have nothing to say or who talk only about trivialities may wonder why they have no friends. While the talent of conversation serves more than just friendship, it plays a crucial role in the enjoyment of friendship.

Extroverts come by their conversational skills more easily. Listening may prove to be a challenge for some. Indeed, listening demands not only a recognition of what is said, but also how it is said and with what feeling. Only then do we begin to understand what our friend would tell us.

**12. “Want a friend? Be a friend.”**

When I told my brother that I was writing this essay, he quoted me this old Kentucky proverb. Like so many proverbs, it captures so

much in so few words. Friendship does not drop out of the sky. It is not a right. It is not owed me. It cannot be bought—though some may try. Rather, goodness recognizes goodness and seeks it out.

Friendship comes in response to the gift I offer freely to whomever comes along. If I am suspicious about everyone and everything, then friendship will come hard. If my friends have to be better than I am, then they will be few, if any. Yes, some friends may disappoint us, even badly, and there is a real sadness in that. Still, if you want a friend, be a friend. For friends are a sign of God's goodness and grace, and grace abounds.

# 6. A Thorn in the Flesh: Celibate Chastity and the Messenger of Satan

REV. KURT STASIAK, OSB

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he [did not take it away]. 2 Cor. 12:7-9a (NRSV)

Speculation as to what St. Paul's thorn was, is best left to those producing abstruse doctoral dissertations or, perhaps, salacious bestsellers. We may never know the precise nature of Paul's affliction, but we certainly know the kind of experience with that "messenger of Satan" about which he writes. Most of us will admit to suffering from some "thorn in the flesh": some painful intrusion into our heart, mind and soul we just can't seem to rid ourselves of. Depending upon the circumstances or what's at stake, we might consider our thorn a bad habit, an unwanted personality trait or a sin.

## **A Thorn by Any Other Name**

Thorns in the flesh are not created equally, of course. What is a minor frustration to one will be a major irritation to another. Some relate to their thorn as "something I've just learned to live with," while for others the thorn aggravates an open sore teeming with spiritual or psychological infection. For three decades, I have ministered to seminarians<sup>1</sup> as a professor, spiritual director and

1. While the focus of this article is ministry to seminarians,

confessor. Ask them to name their “thorn in the flesh” and, without hesitation, many will identify it as a struggle with masturbation.<sup>2</sup>

Masturbation seems to be more a thorn for seminarians than for their civilian counterparts, but I don’t think this means that masturbation is a temptation only for those trying to live the celibate life! The fact is, many would argue that masturbation shouldn’t be much of an issue—and certainly not a matter for confession—at all. Some see it a normal part of human development, especially for adolescents and young adults. Others, “going by the numbers,” declare it statistically normal. We hear from some that, since masturbation does no harm to others, it should be treated merely as a private matter—a concern only if the individual considers it something about which to be concerned.

We’ll be reminded that the Old Testament text (Gen. 38:9) referring to Onan’s masturbation condemns more his betrayal of his responsibilities toward his dead brother than an act of self-abuse. Physicians may point out that masturbation is an efficient, effective way of obtaining a sperm sample. And the Internet will tirelessly provide all the information anyone ever wanted to know about the physical *benefits* masturbation allegedly confers! So: is masturbation developmentally or statistically normal, psychologically and

much of what I offer is relevant to the ministry we offer our brother priests and men and women religious.

2. Often related to a struggle with masturbation is the habit of indulging in pornography—usually, given its “anonymity, accessibility, and affordability,” Internet pornography. As the Web fosters the disease, it occasionally offers some relief:

[www.internetbehavior.com](http://www.internetbehavior.com) is one site that provides helpful resources for understanding and managing this behavior.

physically healthy and even medically advised in certain situations, a matter for the individual to avoid or adopt according to personal preference?

I'll steer clear of that endless discussion for two reasons. First, it is endless. Second, ultimately, we return to the teaching of the *Church*—a teaching we are bound to accept, follow, teach and help others embrace.

### **The Teaching of the Church**

For our purposes, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes the Church's teaching on masturbation most economically in two paragraphs. The first begins by defining masturbation as “the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure,” and then offers an objective moral evaluation of the act:

“Both the Magisterium of the Church, in the course of a constant tradition, and the moral sense of the faithful have been in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.” “The deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside of marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose.” For here sexual pleasure is sought outside of “the sexual relationship which is demanded by the moral order and in which the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love is achieved.”<sup>3</sup>

To anyone even minimally familiar with the Church's teaching on sexual matters, there are no surprises here. Masturbation is an

3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), no. 2352, par. 1. The paragraph includes two citations from *Persona humana*, the 1975 Declaration published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

intrinsically and gravely disordered action because it makes use of the sexual faculty in a way essentially contrary to its purpose.

A complementary perspective—not an opposing one—is offered by the following paragraph.

To form an equitable judgment about the subjects' moral responsibility and to guide pastoral action, one must take into account the affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors that lessen, if not even reduce to a minimum, moral culpability.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Context for an Equitable Judgment**

Catholics of a previous era were not offered much of a “gray area” in any matter involving sexuality, and this was certainly true when it came to masturbation. I remember that seventh-grade lecture way back in 1965, in which one of our parish priests provided us boys—most of whom were tiptoeing on the front porch of puberty—with a vague and confusing description of what masturbation was, but was clear and certain in telling us it was always to be considered a mortal sin, thus deserving the same condemnation as adultery, murder and missing Mass on Sunday.<sup>5</sup>

4. *Catechism*, no. 2352, par. 2. Lust, masturbation, fornication, pornography, prostitution, and rape are the six “offenses against chastity” the *Catechism* cites in nos. 2351-2356. Interestingly, in addition to stating that certain economic or social factors can attenuate the imputability of the offense of prostitution, the *Catechism* offers a pastoral comment only as regards masturbation.
5. Only a few years later the spiritual director of my high school seminary, God rest his soul, stood before all hundred of us, ages 12-18, and declared that masturbation was murder because we were “disposing of

The *Catechism's* paragraph about “forming an equitable judgment” certainly reflects a more nuanced appreciation and understanding of both human behavior and sin.

My experience, though, is that seminarians often have difficulty in forming an “equitable judgment about [their] moral responsibility” as regards masturbation. Some feel the *Catechism's* two paragraphs set up the proverbial “rock and a hard place,” and that they are constantly being shoved from one rough side to the other. They may admit that while they do find some reassurance from the *Catechism's* second paragraph, they feel it “spiritually safer” to assess their behavior strictly according to the first. Images and experiences of God, sin and grace obviously are at work here.

I know that some claim that a pastoral approach is “whatever makes people happy.” This is not my understanding of a pastoral approach. The *Catechism's* guidelines about forming “an equitable judgment about the subjects' moral responsibility” are not escape clauses or moral loopholes. Rather, they offer a basis upon which to assess the subjective guilt (moral culpability) in the light of the act's objective gravity. Pastoral action does not excuse, rationalize or allow—still less does it condone—behavior that is not healthy, wholesome or appropriate. The *Catechism's* second paragraph does not offer a concession to lax behavior but, rather, calls one to conversion, with the reassurance that less-than-perfect compliance does not result in automatic and eternal damnation.

Pastoral action seeks to guide, challenge and support a person in a specific situation in the light of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. Sound pastoral practice does not oppose, but rather serves, Church teaching. In line with that, I offer here three principles that provide the context from which my following remarks proceed. The

half a human being.” Even then we considered him a holy man; even then we were glad he taught geography and not science.

second and third statements are found in the *Catechism's* treatment of "The Vocation to Chastity," and immediately precede the *Catechism's* no. 2352 we have considered above.

- Priestly celibacy is celibate *chastity*. Celibate chastity is not the losing, denying, or surrendering of one's sexuality. It is a commitment to learn and practice living and loving without genital expression. As is true when considering any virtue, chastity requires discipline and practice, and is ultimately possible only through and with our cooperation with God's grace.
- Chastity includes an *apprenticeship in self-mastery* which is a training in human freedom. ...Self-mastery is a *long and exacting work*. One can never consider it acquired once and for all. It presupposes renewed effort at all stages of life. The effort required can be more intense in certain periods, such as when the personality is being formed during childhood and adolescence.<sup>6</sup>
- Chastity has *laws of growth* which progress through stages marked by imperfection and too often by sin. Man...day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves, and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth.<sup>7</sup>

Relying upon these three statements as a foundation, I offer some reflections from my experience in dealing with the spiritual and emotional fallout many seminarians encounter in their struggles with chastity, especially the habit of masturbation. My hope is that these reflections will encourage profitable discussion—discussion between a seminarian and his spiritual director and confessor, to be sure, but also among seminary formators.

6. *Catechism*, nos. 2339, 2342.

7. *Catechism*, no. 2343.



### **They are Good People, These Seminarians**

Our seminarians are good men. All of them would agree they need to become better men. They come to the seminary knowing a lot, but most of them know they still have a lot to learn—about God and themselves, about grace and sin, about commitment and conversion.

I find most of them honest and docile. Their openness to their spiritual directors and counselors—and, not infrequently, even their disclosing some of their difficulties and issues to their formators in the external forum—is admirable, reflecting their trust in their formators and a willingness to be confronted by them. We may consider some of them overly pious, and others may seem to us to have too much of a tendency to view life in absolutes (“But, Father, what is *the* answer?”), but their love of God and their desire to grow in that love is clear. Most approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation far more frequently than their secular peers. The reasons for this frequency may range from an inclination toward being “devotional” to a tendency toward being “compulsive,” but it is clear that the sacrament offers them something they desperately seek.

#### **Beware the “Litmus Test”**

Unfortunately, it seems sometimes that what the sacrament offers them is a “quick fix.” I do not mean this in an insensitive or disrespectful way. As mentioned, seminarians approach the confessional far more frequently than do their counterparts outside the seminary. Given the norms outlined by the *Program of Priestly Formation*, this is encouraged, expected and welcomed.<sup>8</sup> What can be frustrating, however—to the confessor as well as to the

8. *Program of Priestly Formation*, fifth ed. (USCCB, 2006), no. 110, 120. See also Pope John Paul II’s comments on the importance of the sacrament of reconciliation to seminarians in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), no. 48.

seminarian—is that masturbation seems to *drive* some seminarians to the sacrament.

Masturbation has often been described as an act in and by which an individual “fixates on himself,” and some seminarians tend to fixate further on masturbation as the primary way in which they define themselves. Masturbation can become the fast-acting, rapidly readable litmus test that determines whether they are living virtuously or sinfully. “I am a good seminarian because I haven’t masturbated for *x* number of days or weeks” or “I am a bad seminarian because I masturbated yesterday.” As is evident from these statements, there is a tendency among some to determine the state of their soul primarily by using one act as the constant and primary reference point.

Once *this* becomes the habitual way of examining one’s thoughts, words and deeds, the shrinking of one’s conscience is in process and moral myopia is just around the corner (“As long as I haven’t masturbated, I’m fine.”) We can certainly hold that masturbation is not the ideal—that *at the very least* it always indicates more growth is called for—without making it the defining factor of our relationship with God, our service to our neighbor and our response to our vocation. It is important to recall the *Catechism*’s words pertaining to chastity, cited above, regarding “self-mastery” and the “laws of growth.”

### **The Force of Acquired Habit**

Our seminarians come from a culture in which what was once unspeakable and forbidden can now be easily accessed, displayed and saved to disk. By the time a seminarian begins priestly formation, he has had more than enough time to acquire a habit that is difficult to break, a habit supported in no small way by having acquired more than enough visual images (virtual or hard copy) that prove difficult to delete.

The *Catechism* cites the “force of acquired habit” as one thing to consider when forming an equitable judgment about moral responsibility, and I believe not a few seminarians do suffer from an addiction to masturbation. Evidence of this is abundant in their

confessions. It is clear they struggle. It is clear they consider masturbation wrong. It is clear they are sometimes desperate to break the “force of this acquired habit,” to excise the thorn that, despite their best prayers, intentions and efforts, seems destined to forever puncture their flesh.

Their frustration is indication enough that masturbation is hardly an act to which they give free, unrestrained, carefree consent. Again, the point here is not to dismiss their and the Church's concerns about masturbation. It is to remind them of those words of St. Paul that began this article: words reflecting a desperate (and, ultimately, confident) cry to God for help.

#### **The Eucharist: To Receive or to Refrain?**

The daily celebration of the Eucharist in the seminary community can pose a regular “rock and a hard place” to those struggling with a habit of masturbation. If he has not had a chance to go to confession, the seminarian may not want to receive communion for fear of committing a sacrilege. Yet the close and familiar confines of the seminary chapel can make not receiving difficult. “If you don't feel right about receiving and don't join the communion line, it's almost like a public confession,” one seminarian remarked. Another asked, with obvious frustration: “If I masturbate three times a week, should I go to confession three times? What does the Church want from me?” Unfortunately, no document can provide the unambiguous answer for every seminarian in every situation. This is a real part of human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral *formation and education!*

One approach, of course, is to refer the seminarian to the traditional Church practice in such circumstances: that if he believes he is in a state of mortal sin and it is physically or morally impossible for him to go to confession prior to Mass, he make an act of perfect contrition, receive the Eucharist and seek reconciliation later. But then there is the question, “What do we mean by *later*?”

#### **The Confessor: Effective Encourager or Inevitable Enabler?**

I have heard some seminarians say, “Thank God there's always a priest available for confession here at the seminary.” There is,

indeed, something wonderful about that availability but, in my opinion, there is also the danger that it can hinder a seminarian from learning how to deal with such matters in moral and mature ways. The title of this section is overstated only a little. We do want to minister effectively. But what of the seminarian who approaches the confessional several times a week because he has given in to the temptation to masturbate several times?

Do we hear his confession every time he requests it? No priest will want to brush off the seminarian's concerns or otherwise exhibit a lack of compassion and sensitivity, but neither will he want to encourage a mentality that promotes understanding the sacrament as a spiritual 9-1-1 call. Such seems only to encourage the litmus test syndrome and the fear that one can move completely into and out of God's favor rapidly and frequently.

Is it possible to misuse the sacrament and unintentionally end up as enablers ("come and get clean"), rather than those who, step by step, help the seminarian in the much more difficult task of gradual conversion? How do we, on one hand, appropriately and necessarily respect where the seminarian is, given his background, education and spirituality and, on the other hand, also appropriately and necessarily lead him into the next stage of development where the sacrament is not hastened to in a spiritual panic, but is celebrated as part of a process of conversion?

What attitudes and approaches to the sacrament are we fostering in those in formation, and how helpful will those attitudes and approaches be in their future? What models are we providing to the seminarian that will help him deal with God and himself when he is alone in his parish, preparing to celebrate the morning Mass, conscious that he viewed pornography and engaged in masturbation only a few hours before?

A final comment about confession. The practice varies among seminarians: some see one priest for spiritual direction and celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a different priest (or priests), while others have the same priest as director and confessor. There are advantages and disadvantages to both, and so when I am

asked which choice is better, I spend some time discussing those pros and cons.

In the case of a seminarian struggling with masturbation who is inclined to seek the sacrament several times a month (or even within a week), I believe there might be some advantage in encouraging the seminarian to celebrate the sacrament with his spiritual director. I believe this would lend more consistency in advice and approach. It may be difficult for a seminarian's confessor to advise this, and so I suggest the spiritual director take the initiative in this regard at the appropriate time. The point here certainly is not to diminish one's freedom in seeking a confessor. But, since obviously a seminarian's spiritual director and confessor cannot and will not consult with one another, it is, again, to strive for a great consistency in attitude, advice and approach.

### **Concluding Remarks**

My intention here has not been to present the "definitive solution" to the objectively sinful act of masturbation, the "thorn in the flesh" experienced by many seminarians.<sup>9</sup> Rather, I have posed some thoughts and questions to assist spiritual directors and confessors in their work with those in formation. As I noted above, I hope these reflections will encourage profitable discussion between seminarians and their spiritual directors and confessors, and also among seminary formators. I offer four final points.

First, seminarians struggling with the habit of masturbation (and pornography) need assurance they are not alone. That others struggle with similar temptations and tendencies neither dismisses nor diminishes the objective gravity of the act or the subjective feelings of guilt and frustration. One question I often ask a seminarian burdened with guilt and frustration is, "If a good friend

9. One resource offering many practical suggestions concerning the practice of chastity is Fr. Benedict Groeschel's *The Courage to Be Chaste* (Paulist, 1985).

of yours—a person you admire for a number of reasons—were to admit to you the sin of masturbation and it was within your power to do so, would you assign him to hell?” Always, the response is, “Of course not.” I then ask the seminarian to explain how he arrived at such an “equitable judgment,” and ask him in what ways it would be appropriate for him to apply some of the same reasoning when assessing his own conscience. This has often been helpful.

Second, a discussion concerning the meaning and use of sacramental reconciliation, especially as it relates to sins against and difficulties with the practice of chastity, would benefit many seminarians. Such a discussion should certainly be part of the seminarian’s pastoral formation for, as a future minister of the sacrament himself, he must understand and appreciate the sacrament as one of the regular means of conversion in the Christian life, and not only or primarily as an eschatological fire extinguisher.

Third, Pope Paul VI referred to priestly celibacy as a “motive for pastoral charity,”<sup>10</sup> and for some seminarians their struggles with chastity might also present them with a motive to develop a greater pastoral charity in their dealings with others. I said above that masturbation should not be seen as the litmus test that gives a quick readout of one’s sin. But a habit of masturbation is a ready reminder of one’s weakness, and so is also a constant counterpoint to one’s pride and self-righteousness. St. Paul himself suggests as much by his comment that the thorn in his flesh was given precisely so that he would not become too elated.

I’m reminded of St. Benedict’s admonition to his monks, “If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself, but be certain that the evil you commit is always your own

10. *Sacerdotalis caelibatus* (1965), no. 24.

and yours to acknowledge.”<sup>11</sup> For some, the thorn of masturbation will be a frequent reminder of their need for God’s grace, and that we all seek—and benefit from—another’s compassion more than their judgment. Such reflection can broaden one’s conscience to include sins against charity—particularly, perhaps, sins of omission against charity.

Finally, seminarians must—as must we all, when confronting something in ourselves that is not of grace—be encouraged to trust in God’s mercy. Here is the place to recall those words of St. Paul to which we have been referring, while adding the lesson Paul learned from his struggle with his thorn, a lesson (printed in italics) he passes on to his brother ministers of the Gospel:

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, *but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”* So, *I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.* (2 Cor. 12:7-9)

11. Rule of Saint Benedict 4, 42-43. RB 1980, ed. Timothy Fry (Liturgical Press, 1981).

# 7. In the Moments of Ministry: Celibacy and the Married Minister

REV. RICHARD C. STERN, EDD

At the time of this writing, I have been married for almost 39 years, nearly all of my adult life and about two-thirds of my entire life. I am on the clergy roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, ordained in 1976. On these two bases, it might seem like a bit of a stretch for me to be offering any perspectives on celibacy. Yet celibacy is a frequent topic in my conversation and in my thought. Within the context of the Catholic seminary setting where I am a teacher, we talk about celibacy regularly in various forums and on multiple levels.

In these forums, it is understandably assumed that we are talking about the commitment to celibacy made by those men preparing to enter the priesthood of the Catholic Church. I can well imagine that some seminarians may reach a point of fatigue in hearing about celibacy, thinking about it, talking about it and writing about it. “Enough already!” To those within and without the Catholic Church, however, clerical celibacy is the defining characteristic of the Catholic priest. It is a practice that is spoken of as both awesome gift and awful burden, sometimes in the same breath.

Over the years, I have read hundreds of students’ annual self-evaluations, which include responses to questions about their understanding of celibacy. I sometimes find rather quaint the conception of marriage that a few seem to operate with as they write about their commitment to celibacy and giving up marriage. It is something like the article I read some years ago in an ultra-conservative, evangelical Protestant magazine in which an elderly



pastor's wife provided some guidelines for younger pastors' wives about a process for Sunday mornings: get up early to prepare the pastor's favorite breakfast, keep the kids quiet so the pastor/preacher can concentrate on his sermon, make sure he has a laundered, neatly pressed white shirt to put on, and so forth. Dated. Unrealistic. Almost laughable in its naïve prescriptions. The wife patiently waiting at home for her husband to return. Maybe if the Beav's father was a minister it might have happened then, but not today. Not going to happen.

On the other side of the celibacy coin, I have heard some married Protestant pastors speak of their envy of the freedom enjoyed by the celibate priest. No spouse and children to worry about. No college educations to save for on meager salaries. Easier to move to another ministry setting if the situation calls for a change. Easier to say things that need to be said, but that might be potential CLMs (Career Limiting Moves).

It is not that these folks are unhappy being married and being parents. But they do often seem to experience real tension between the occasionally conflicting demands and expectations of ministry and family. There is only so much energy to go around. They want to be at their child's school play or soccer match, but an emergency call from an ailing parishioner requires that a visit to the hospital takes priority – again. After all, God has called them to the ministry; they have to respond to God's call.

We talk about God being the first priority in the lives of all Christians and that everything after that will fall into place. Right? Not really; not always. The tension exists and persists: family or ministry? In the times of ministry to parishioners, for example, the demands of family can conflict with the demands of ministry. The married minister's attention can become divided or distracted. Indeed, the choice might even be described as conflicting demands between ministering to family and ministering to parishioners. This is why I have heard a few sage souls suggest that a pastor's spouse and children would do well to belong to a different parish than the pastor's! A radical suggestion to be sure.

At another level, at the end of the day, it can be difficult to know what to share with one's spouse about what happened during the day. What can be said? What should not be said, out of respect and concern both for one's spouse and for the parishioners? How might an off-handed comment reflect on an innocent (or guilty!) party? Where is the line of confidentiality? Does a rift develop because not all knowledge can be shared? Without a rich and deep history of spiritual direction, Protestant spouses can easily become *de facto* spiritual directors, an unfair burden to place on a spouse.

Both parties – celibates and non-celibates – too often, from my vantage point, operate with an idealized and romanticized vision of the life of the other. My assessment is that the two paths are about equal, a “wash.” Both are demanding, challenging lifestyles that require steady attention and hard, ongoing work to maintain healthy, moderately successful and happy participants. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

But once one feels trapped in either situation, the end is almost certainly on the horizon, either actually or effectively. One's vows can become perfunctory, eventually embittering instead of empowering. The dedication to weather difficult moments withers. Adherence to ethical principles becomes more problematic and watered down, if not completely eroded. Shortcuts are taken. Ministry suffers. Trust is destroyed. People are hurt.

Celibacy, then, is a topic that comes up as part of my role as a teacher forming seminarians for ministry as priests. But my considerations of celibacy long predate my work in a Catholic seminary. Initially, while I was a seminarian in a Lutheran seminary, I became interested in religious community, eventually and particularly in monasticism. There was something about monasticism that appealed to me, even though I was then and still am quite happily married. There was a sense of focus and intentionality about the monastic life and its routine and dedication to prayer that I found attractive.

I was able to sidestep the overly romantic view of monasticism by meeting actual monks who were well-adjusted, devout individuals,

actually quite “normal,” with interests in sports, movies, politics, various genres of music and so forth. I regularly read the *Rule of St. Benedict* as a Lutheran pastor and discovered principles of moderation and community life that applied in principle to anyone seeking a life in response to God’s calling.

So, while many might initially think of celibacy in reference to priesthood in the Catholic Church, I encountered it in terms of religious community. I first thought about celibacy in terms of the monastic vows of celibacy, along with poverty, obedience and, for Benedictines, stability. This becomes a somewhat different discussion than celibacy for diocesan priests. Indeed, I suspect the discussion about monastic celibacy may be more germane or relevant to the married minister than that of priestly celibacy.

The importance of both the individual and the community are clear in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. There is a need to keep both factors in balance, or both eventually suffer. The role of ministers is to develop and then maintain this balance within the community and within their own lives, perhaps on occasion at the expense of their own immediate needs and desires. This is done for the sake of the community, for building up and maintaining the community, always with an eye on faithfulness to Christ’s model and call.

Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, provides a report on interesting discussions between Buddhist and Catholic monks in his book, *Demythologizing Celibacy: Practical Wisdom from Christian and Buddhist Monasticism*.<sup>1</sup> Many of his insights would be serviceable to married and celibate individuals alike living in community. Eventually, as I functioned as a pastor, I began to see real value of the concept of celibacy as a mindset appropriate to all ministers, if only in their “moments of ministry.” This becomes a matter of

1. William Skudlarek. *Demythologizing Celibacy: Practical Wisdom from Christian and Buddhist Monasticism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989).

importance both for individual ministers and for the community as a whole, exercised for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the community. “Celibate” becomes a shorthand when talking about expectations and attitudes of ministers.

In either case (celibacy in priesthood or in monasticism), it is important to keep in mind that the religious practice of celibacy predates Catholicism by centuries, and it continues in non-Catholic settings, both Christian and non-Christian, sacred and secular. The first-century Jewish Essene community, of which John the Baptist was a likely member, was celibate. There is, even in the United States, a history of celibate communities that have no connection to Catholicism at all. The most notable example would be the Shakers, although there have been other celibate utopian communities as well.

There is a history of celibacy in the practices of non-Christian religions as well, among Hindus and Buddhists, for example. The significant numbers of Buddhists in the United States warrant a chapter in the history of American religiosity. This is all to suggest that the Catholic Church did not invent and does not have a monopoly on the practice of celibacy, although the topic of celibacy is, of course, most frequently connected to Catholicism’s requirement of celibacy for its priests. Discussions are carried on in many levels, official and unofficial. Hopefully, the recognition that celibacy is not a uniquely Catholic practice gives others, really, gives all, permission to see what values it might hold, whatever their marital status, much as I have found value in reading the *Rule of St. Benedict*, even though I am not a monk. As Elizabeth Abbott puts it, “Celibacy, I quickly understood, was a staggering panorama of reality, involving humanity everywhere and always.”<sup>2</sup>

There are simple definitions of celibacy that unfortunately hide or obscure the complexity of the practice. Celibacy can simply be

## 2. Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1999). 16.

considered as the situation or practice of not being married. It could be a practice that one chooses or a practice that is forced upon one. In *A History of Celibacy*, author Elizabeth Abbott speculates about a number of possibilities in which celibacy is forced upon one. For example, prison inmates were once denied all conjugal visits. Male and female children who were left for monasteries to care for became religious celibates with little real say in the matter.

In China, the one-child policy, along with a preference for male children, has resulted in many young men having no prospects for marriage because there are simply too few marriageable women to go around.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps economics make marriage impossible for a time or for a lifetime. It could be a permanent situation or one existing for a period of time dictated by cultural tradition, economics, social values and various other contingencies. Perhaps an older sibling takes it upon herself to live with and care for her aging parents at the expense of her own independent life. These latter examples have no particular foundation in religion.

Celibacy and chastity are often confused or conflated. Indeed, this is a decision that Elizabeth Abbott has intentionally made in *A History of Celibacy*, that is, to conflate the two terms since they are so often related matters.<sup>4</sup> Richard Sipe offers an expanded definition in *Celibacy: A Way of Loving, Living, and Serving*, “Celibacy is a freely chosen dynamic state, usually vowed, that involves an honest and sustained attempt to live without direct sexual gratification in order to serve others productively for a spiritual motive.”<sup>5</sup>

Here the definition becomes considerably more specific with references to “freely chosen,” vows and spiritual motives. I began to

3. Abbott, 293-294.

4. Abbott, 17.

5. A.W. Richard Sipe. *Celibacy: A Way of Loving, Living, and Serving* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri, 1996). 40.

think that the idea or the attitude of celibacy could be applied in a temporary fashion, a state one goes into and out of, in particular, when someone is actively engaged in ministerial activities. The mindset of “celibacy” would not necessarily resolve all these questions. Perhaps, on occasion, however, the expectations might become clearer.

My hope is to broaden the discussion a little to remind us that celibacy is not unique to the Catholic clerical setting with its call for celibate male priests, not even when we add vowed celibate monks and nuns. Some have chosen celibacy for other than religious reasons, as well, either permanently or temporarily, as a response to needs and/or goals that make marriage and the achievement of those goals incompatible. Even within marriage, couples may become celibate/chaste for a period of time.

Some cultures *assume* a period of celibacy/chastity, that is, a postpartum abstinence following the birth of a child.<sup>6</sup> To be clear, however, what I am thinking of is celibacy in a religious context, for religious and theological reasons. Numerous faithful lay people have also taken personal vows of celibacy as a way of expressing or actualizing their faith in God, which leads to a spiritual wholeness or fulfillment. A few of them have become sainted.

Further, however, I want to suggest that *anyone* engaged in Christian ministry, at the point of or at the moment of ministry, must also consider himself or herself as “celibate.” I do not intend to question, minimize, erode, exaggerate, expand, contract or collapse the distinctions and charisms of celibate and married life. Both are ways of life to which one might be called; both are paths to holiness. Nor do I wish to engage the matter of priestly celibacy. I simply suggest a way of thinking in which a Gospel-driven ministry requires its practitioners to appropriate and embody the mindset of the celibate at that ministerial moment, practicing a self-giving love

## 6. Abbott, 295-299.

that is concerned solely with the well-being of the other, without any worry about attachment or possessiveness.

Celibacy allows me, in that moment of ministry, the freedom to surrender to the pastoral needs of the other at the expense of my hopes and expectations, recognizing the other as “unique and irreplaceable, precious and sacred.”<sup>7</sup> This is made reasonable when God and my relationship with God has become my all, my grounding. (I am bracketing here the obvious objection that celibacy in and of itself is no guarantee of this mindset. There is all too much evidence that some who are celibate violate its underpinnings in flagrant violation of its foundational principles with a shocking lack of respect for personal and professional boundaries.)

We can afford this radical surrender because we believe we have been given the grace to do so, whether for an hour or for a lifetime. We are freed from the consumer-oriented mindset that objectifies the other as a means for my own satisfaction. Or as Colon and Field write, “it becomes the freedom to redefine sexuality apart from the pressures to have sex and the consumer culture that dictates the rules for those encounters.”<sup>8</sup>

In part, this is a matter of pastoral or ministerial ethics, because, generally speaking, the minister holds the greater share of power in a ministerial situation; it is up to the minister to practice ministry ethically, morally. The person to whom one is ministering must be able to trust that the minister will faithfully act in the best interests of the one to whom he or she is ministering without regard for the minister’s needs and desires. This would be true for all professionals.

7. Mark O’Keefe. *Priestly Wisdom* (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 2004). 31.
8. Christine A. Colon and Bonnie E. Field. *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009). 43.

But for a Christian practitioner, as Richard Gula writes, “a moral ministry must be closely related to experiences of God and convictions about God. God is the ultimate center of value, the fixed point of reference for the morally right and wrong, the source and goal of all moral striving.”<sup>9</sup> We might go a step further and claim ministry as our *vocation*. Again Gula writes, “To say that pastoral ministry is a vocation means that it is a free response to God’s call in and through the community to commit oneself in love to serve others.”<sup>10</sup>

What is at stake is higher in this attitude, not just a professional code but a code based on one’s calling or theological vocation. We are addressing a way of life and an understanding of life that is more than a technical or legal adherence to a code; it is a matter of a deep, faith-filled understanding of what the Gospel calls for in our relationships with one another and then practicing that in a professional, ministerial setting. This sort of ministry is warranted and made possible by the example of Christ and also by the sacrifice of Christ that frees us and empowers us to be other-oriented as we conduct our ministerial practice.

Our concern as ministers of the Gospel, whether lay or ordained, is for the welfare of the other. When it is not, we have violated our calling, whether married or celibate. We have made our own satisfaction the goal or benefit of the ministry. Our needs and desires have taken priority over those of the other. Donald Cozzens writes that, “Celibates are perceived as men and women for others. As missionaries, teachers, nurses and pastors, they have ‘left all’ and risked everything in heroic response to the gospel.”<sup>11</sup> He also writes

9. Richard M. Gula. *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996). 9.

10. Gula, 11.

11. Donald Cozzens. *Freeing Celibacy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006). 12-13.



with regard to celibacy, “Living simply and humbly by the lights of the gospel in a culture saturated with self-serving ambition and insatiable material lust is indeed counter-cultural – and radical.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly, this is true for the lifelong celibate, but equally so for all those who engage in ministry.

Ministry and hospitality are related concepts. Hospitality precedes any real opportunity for ministry. Fr. Mark O’Keefe, OSB, notes, “Ministry is about hospitality. In whatever form or context, ministry involves welcoming others as they are and in their concrete and unique circumstances, welcoming Christ in them, and, then, helping them to see and to welcome Christ for themselves in the sometimes unlikely situations where He is not easily recognized.”<sup>13</sup> With hospitality comes the freedom to listen deeply, rather than merely to tell, advise or answer.

Over and over, as I have read literature on celibacy, there is frequent reference to this matter of focus and freedom, the freedom to minister to another without a potential sense or fear of attachment or possessiveness. Yet many of these observations seemed to apply equally to me as a married pastor ministering to a parishioner. For example, Fr. Skudlarek writes about monastic celibacy, “Celibacy can also allow the monk to enter into a deeper and more mature relationship with other people, freed from the craving of pleasure or self-interest that is such a common, even if unintended and unrecognized component of most friendships.”<sup>14</sup>

Elizabeth Abbott, with reference to Kathleen Norris’ discussion in *Cloister Walk*, notes a point of similarity between celibacy and marriage, “Like Benedictine celibacy, marriage begins as a sacred lifetime commitment that requires self-transcendence.”<sup>15</sup> Richard

12. Cozzens, 103.

13. O’Keefe, 33

14. Skudlarek, 92.

15. Abbott, 393.

Sipe comments, “Celibacy rests on an appreciative option to forgo the goodness of unitive and procreative love for the sake of serving the reign of God by loving others unconditionally.”<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, he writes, “Celibacy is altruism – sacrifice of self for the other – or it is empty and fraudulent. Work, prayer, and community are united under the impulse and force of altruism – the reason for celibate striving.”<sup>17</sup> Sipe then adds, “When ministry is coupled with celibacy, the expectation of altruism...is intensified in the minds of the public. That – service without reward – is the primary expectation lay people have of their clergy.”<sup>18</sup> I would simply add, “regardless of whether they are permanently celibate or married.”

All people who receive ministry should anticipate the attitude of altruism. This is true for all ministers, the goal toward which all ministry should strive. In all of these quotations, both the celibate and the married minister are called to self-transcendence in the moments of ministry. The attitude that attends these quotations in relationship to celibacy and marriage seems to apply equally well, even more perhaps, to the attitude one ought to assume in any *ministry* – self-transcendence, the goal of focusing on the situation and the needs of the other. In terms of professional ethics, Richard Gula suggests that “a virtuous professional acts inclusively in offering service, in giving reasonable preference to the interests of others, and in not taking advantage of their vulnerability.”<sup>19</sup>

In a culture that bombards us with notions of sex as recreation and is thoroughly saturated with unrelenting sexual innuendo, *any* notion of celibacy is a difficult concept to grasp. I offer a workshop for seminarians on celibacy and the media in which I state that there is virtually nothing in the media (film and television, in particular)

16. Sipe, 4.

17. Sipe, 186.

18. Sipe, 187.

19. Gula, 48.

that would support the decision to be celibate, unless one radically severs the notions of celibacy and chastity, in which case media promote celibacy without any regard for chastity.

The same could also be said of traditional concepts of marriage, especially related to the matter of marital fidelity. It seems that there is hardly a television show on commercial television in which pre-, post-, and extra-marital sex is not only accepted, but promoted and practiced regularly. Commercial media may say that they are simply reflecting the reality of their viewership, but I would propose that they are also shaping ideas and ideals as well. The idea of chaste celibacy as a lifestyle option becomes more and more radically counter-cultural. Faithfulness to one's spouse, much more with celibacy, would seem to be hopelessly archaic, naïve and extremely counter-cultural in a society in which politicians regularly confess their flagrant infidelities; where one can hardly watch a television show in which promiscuity is not only assumed, it is acceptable, seemingly promoted and graphically demonstrated. Our society is saturated with and obsessed with sex. Celibacy? Come on now.

The idea of employing the term “celibacy” for an overall attitude toward ministry is not so terribly profound, I suppose. I do think, however, that it does have a real utility when it comes to helping define or label the nature of the relationships we have with those to whom and with whom we minister.<sup>20</sup> Most discussions about

20. As an example of a celibate mindset for those both with whom and to whom we minister, I mention the policy of some Lutheran judicatories where the single pastor is not even to date members of his or her congregation. One of them would have to leave. This is in contradistinction to earlier days when it was a matter of

marriage and celibacy do not address the specifics related to those ministers who are married. Married ministers, in terms of their ministry, straddle to an important degree the two situations: celibacy and marriage.

The reason for a celibate *mindset* in ministry, whether married or permanently celibate, is its ability to quickly define relationships with those to whom we minister. The nature of Christian ministry is to be oriented to the needs of the other because of what God has done for us. Historically, this has also been a reason for practicing celibacy. I am proposing something more than being a faithful, loyal spouse and parent, more than chastity within marriage for the married minister. I am thinking of something deeper, even perhaps more important. Not just a Catholic or non-Catholic issue. Not just a priest issue. True for permanent deacons, DREs and pastoral associates. True for all ministers of the Gospel.

some pride if a newly minted pastor, typically single until after seminary, married one of the parish's "daughters."