

Celibacy: Living Single for the Lord

The summer evening had turned to dark in an ordinary street in suburban Brussels. In a little room on the top floor of their house, a group of young men prepared for bed by singing Psalm 91:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
and abides in the shade of the Almighty
says to the Lord, “My refuge,
my fortress, my God in whom I trust.”

As I shared their night prayer, I saw the beauty of their life. They could call the Lord their refuge and their fortress. For this was a group of celibate men who had given their whole lives to the service of Christ and his people. Some of them had come from America to Belgium to serve the Church there. Here in the peace of prayer at the close of day I saw that celibacy is not so much giving something up as receiving Someone whose love is beyond any human love.

“Celibacy” simply means “being unmarried”; in the special sense the term is used in the Church, it means promising to remain unmarried for life in order to be specially devoted to God’s service. Another, more descriptive, term might be “living single for the Lord.” In the Catholic Church at present, celibacy is associated either with the consecrated religious life, in which men and women live as part of a special community devoted to prayer or service, such as monks or sisters, or with the priestly life: all bishops, and all priests of the Latin rite, must be men who are living single for the Lord.

If we approach celibacy as a requirement for the priesthood, or as part of a rule of life or service, we miss its essence. It has not always been a requirement for priesthood, although its special advantages have always been recognized. The regular life of consecrated religious follows from the commitment to celibacy, rather than preceding it.

Rather than say, “To be a religious brother or sister, one must be celibate” or “All priests have to follow a rule of celibacy,” it would be more helpful to say, “Groups of celibate men or women have joined together to serve the Church and follow a rule of life,” and “The Church chooses her priests from among men who are living single for the Lord.” Living single for the Lord is not a rule but a call from God, an attitude of the heart, and a way of life.

The celibate life takes many forms. The traditional religious orders provide a tested framework for living single for the Lord. Most of these started at time of renewal in the Church, as men and women followed a call to give their whole lives to the Lord. Other men and women live in secular institutes or third orders. Even today new groups are forming and

flourishing. Some adopt traditional rules such as the Franciscan; others mold new forms of life, faithful to the traditions of the Church.

A Relationship with God

Separated from the special apostolate of a religious order or from the priesthood, what is living single for the Lord? Simply the choice to have God first, above all else, as the love and joy and strength of one's life.

Don Schwager has been living this life with a group of other laymen ever since he graduated from college almost fifteen years ago. "My ambition was always to have a large family. My parents had six children; my grandparents had eight; I figured I could handle ten," he recalls. "But as I approached graduation and began to consider what I would do with my life, I was impressed by what Jesus said when he compared His kingdom to a pearl of great price. I wanted God to be my treasure and portion, to be totally devoted to him. Much as I wanted to be married, I saw that I could give up even that for God. I had always associated celibacy with the priesthood or some other special service, but now I saw that I could live that way just for a deeper relationship with the Lord."

In the New Testament

The greatest example of living single for the Lord is Jesus himself. He chose never to marry in order to fulfill the mission the Father had given him: to suffer and die for our salvation. Jesus also presented celibacy as an option to his disciples. Instead of investing themselves in marriage and an earthly posterity, they could become "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12).

St. Paul followed this advice from the Lord. He did not marry, and traveled all over the Roman Empire spreading the Good News. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he recommends this form of life as that which will best permit a Christian to give "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor 7:35). While Paul clearly teaches that God has established marriage as a great sacrament, he points out that those who are married have duties that necessarily take time and attention away from God. Since "the form of this world is passing away" (v. 31), those who can should rather invest themselves in the life to come.

God's Word and His call are the same today as they were in those days. Many people do not hear the call to live single for the Lord because they do not see the supreme importance of following Christ. Every Christian should live in the light of eternity, realizing that this world is, indeed, passing away. The Christian vocation is not to a life of unbroken ease and self-indulgence, whether one is married or single. The currents of contemporary culture that fight the Church's teaching on marriage also obscure the option of celibacy.

What Is Involved

Making the decision to live single for the Lord is probably the hardest aspect of that life. Fears of the unknown loom up, with doubts concerning one's ability to cope with the pressures. One woman, herself committed to celibacy, describes the struggles of college students she has helped in similar decisions: "Many of these women think God is going to tell them what He wants them to do. They want Him to tell them. But He almost never does. It has to be a free decision." This was her own case. "I went on retreat, and there I felt God tell me that I could please him either married or single; that I should choose the state of life that made me happier. I chose to be single for the Lord because I could experience Him more in that life, and that is what made me happiest. I can also serve Him in ways I never could if I were married."

Men and women who choose to live single for the Lord should be capable of marriage. In fact, distaste for marriage or feelings of inadequacy may be signs a person should marry. At least these difficulties should be resolved first, before one makes a decision. The Lord wants a free choice; he also wants strong men and women serving him. Celibacy is not the last refuge of a failure.

Forgoing a sexual relationship for life may seem the greatest difficulty of living single for the Lord. But the obsession with sex in today's culture obscures a simple fact: the sexual self-control required for living single for the Lord is required for all Christians before marriage, and from time to time afterward. Chastity is not a fashionable virtue, but it is the duty of every Christian now as much as ever. A Christian who happens not to marry is no less bound to refrain completely from sexual relations than a celibate. It is not the simple fact of not engaging in sexual relations that makes someone single for the Lord, but the reason for which it is done and the lifelong nature of the commitment.

Nevertheless, one consideration in making the decision to live single for the Lord is how possible it will be for one to put aside permanently all possibility of a sexual relationship. St. Paul recognized that there were some who, because of their personalities, would find this life a burden and ought to marry. As he wrote, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9).

A Different Kind of Family

There is a natural desire in every man and woman for a family. Celibates, as "eunuchs for the Kingdom" do not enjoy the benefits of a natural family. They often find this desire fulfilled, however, in their service to the Church. Don Schwager has worked with college students and other young men: "Instead of physical sons, I have spiritual sons, and many more than I could have had if I were married." A woman who does similar work cites Isaiah 54:1: "The children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married." She says, "Now for children, I have all the people that God sends to me."

One priest calls himself “a courtier of the Lord.” In the old days, kings kept courtiers around them, constantly attending them. I could be very hard on courtiers if they had families and lands to attend to when the king demanded their presence at court. Yet at the same time the rewards of serving at court could be great. Our king is Jesus; the celibate is a courtier of the king and can attend on him constantly. This constant attendance on the Lord, for a married person, would interfere with the necessary duties of family life; the celibate, on the other hand, has nowhere else to go.

In response to this constant devotion God fills the voids in the heart that might be left by forgoing marriage and family. As Don Schwager puts it: “While I was considering living single for the Lord, I was afraid that I would be lonely. But once I had made the decision, the Lord filled that need Himself. Since I decided to live single for the Lord, I haven’t experienced a day of loneliness in my life.”

“What a terrible waste of human potential,” some people say. That argument is nothing new. In a famous medieval poem, *The Romance of the Rose*, the character of Nature put it in terms of the reproduction of the human race: if celibates have no children, then Nature’s desire for fertility will be thwarted. Today, we are more apt to think in terms of the inner psychological potential of the individual. Yet we make many choices in our lives, each of which involves the abandoning of one thing for another. The argument against celibacy from nature or human potential fails to recognize the greater good of knowing, loving, and serving God. It is a waste, in a sense, but to waste one’s self and one’s life on God is an act of faith and a sacrifice pleasing to him.

A Sign of the Life to Come

Celibacy is a sign to the Christian people of the life of heaven. The early monks referred to living single for the Lord as “the angelic life” because in the Kingdom to come, Jesus told us, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mk 12:25). Thus to live single for the Lord is to enjoy on earth some foreshadowing of the life of heaven, and to manifest to others a sign of how full all Christians will be of the love of God in the life to come.

“It’s like being married to God.” That’s how celibates describe their life. Earthly marriage, like all God’s earthly gifts, lasts only “until death us do part.” That is a short time in the perspective of eternity. But living single for the Lord does not end with this life. The commitment to celibacy is a marriage vow and more: it is a marriage vow that lasts forever.

Marriage Is a Vocation, Too

As a young man, St. Thomas More lived for a while in the Carthusian monastery in London. He seriously considered becoming a priest, but found that he could not overcome the natural desire for a wife. Resolving to be rather “a faithful husband than an unfaithful priest,” he married and had four children. He did not, however, abandon either his determination to serve God or his life of prayer. His home was a place where prayer and Christian learning were at the center. He himself defended the faith of the Catholic Church during his life and witnessed to it by his death.

St. Thomas More lived his marriage as a Christian vocation. Yet some people think that the only real call from God is to live single. Marriage, in this way of thinking, is for those who are less than religious. The Church, however, following the Gospel, teaches that God has made marriage a sacrament and a vocation. Just because he calls most people to be married does not make it any less a vocation from him.

A person who has seriously considered living single for the Lord can perhaps see this better. Geoff Shell is a computer programmer, married and with one child, an active lay leader in his parish. For over two years, he lived with a group of men, with whom he hoped to make a commitment to live single for the Lord. “There were four things that attracted me to their life,” he now says. “First of all, I wanted my whole life to be at the service of God and his people. Secondly, I enjoyed the brotherhood of other men dedicated to the Lord; I also wanted to live a very simple life. I guess I had a sort of Franciscan ideal. And finally I saw that prayer and worship are the most important things in a man’s life.”

But all the while, he still had a desire for a family. He knew that he could probably sacrifice that desire, but that it would always be an effort. After consulting spiritual advisors, he left the brothers and married. In marriage, he has found that many of his desires could still be fulfilled, although in a different form. “We still serve God as a family,” he says. “My wife and I are agreed that we will try to live more simply than many people around us, so that we can contribute to the poor and to God’s work. We also make prayer, both individually and as a family, our highest priority. The desire for brotherhood is now fulfilled in marriage; the contentment I never found before I now find in the marriage relationship. Because of this inner peace, I am able to serve God better, in my job and among God’s people. This is the life to which God has called me.”

Does he miss life with the brothers? “I’m still good friends with them, and I visit them sometimes. I can see that it’s a good life, too; I hope one of my sons can live that life.”