

CELIBACY FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM

Read Matthew 19:12.

In the OT to be a eunuch was a thing a shame and they were considered to be cursed by God. If you weren't able to be 'fruitful and multiply' then you were excluded from normal society. In most countries of Africa that's still the case today.

Those who are celibate for the sake of the kingdom have chosen to abstain from sexual relations. Some priests say they had no choice, but they did because they knew before they were ordained that priesthood and celibacy were part of the one packet. That was before we started admitting married Anglican clergy into the Catholic Church which, of course is different scenario.

However, Christ's words make a special place for celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. Jesus commends people who leave father and mother and wife and family for the sake of the gospel. They will be repaid in this life and the next. So the roots of celibacy are in the gospel itself. St Paul has also told us that you cannot combine spiritual fatherhood of the family of God with fatherhood of a natural family. The two don't mix. Celibacy is not an arbitrary rule which the Church imposed on its clergy for no reason. However, for practical purposes the alienation of church property at the time may have added some weight to the church's decision.

In the theology of the body we are given a refreshing perspective on the celibate vocation. The last Pope says that celibacy doesn't devalue sexual union but on the contrary it points to its ultimate fulfilment. The married and celibate vocations are intertwined. If marriage is devalued, as it is today, so also is celibacy. We see where the so-called sexual revolution brought on a dramatic rise in divorce and a corresponding rapid decline in vocations to priesthood and sisterhood.

In Mt 22 we see where the Sadducees who didn't believe in the Resurrection try to catch Jesus out with a woman who married seven men. They put the question: at the Resurrection at the end of time whose husband would she be. But Jesus shows them up for the lack of scriptural knowledge and says that at the Resurrection 'they neither marry nor are given in marriage'.

Marriage in this life is meant to foreshadow Heaven where the marriage of Christ and His Church will be seen in all its glory. The greatest desire of the human heart, whether married or celibate is to live in everlasting communion with God Himself. Will earthly spouses know one another in heaven? Of course they will. In fact everyone taking part in the heavenly wedding feast will be in the most intimate possible communion with everyone else. That is why it is important to get your affairs in order before you die and not to be at loggerheads with anyone especially your wife or husband or parish community if you are a priest.

God's plan for all Eternity is to marry us. (Hosea 2-19). Jesus left his Father in Heaven and eventually left the home of his mother on Earth so that he could lay down his life out of love for his spouse, the Church, which includes you and me. Symbolically speaking husbands and wives lay down their lives for each other in marriage. Jesus says: "Anyone who puts his hand to the plough and look back is not fit for the Kingdom of Heaven".

The nuptial meaning of marriage happens in time but it points the way to the Heavenly nuptials. Celibacy for celibacy sake is useless unless it points beyond itself. Now there are some celibates who use it for their own egotistical ends. So also, married people may fail to truly understand the self-giving nature of marriage. The separation of sex from procreation has dealt a heavy blow to self-giving in marriage. Priests who surround themselves with material things and worldly comforts have also have lost the plot regarding the meaning of priesthood.

Both the celibate and marriage vocations are a call to express 'nuptial love' through their bodies. Every man is called to be both a husband and father, every woman is called to be both a wife and a mother, either through marriage or the celibate vocation. For a celibate man, his bride is the church and for a celibate woman her husband is Christ.

Is celibacy the higher calling of the two like St Pauls says? The superiority of continence does not mean denigrating marriage. It does not mean that we are leaning towards the Manichean heresy which viewed sex and the body as tainted. Celibacy is only higher in the sense that that heaven is higher than earth.

But even though it might be a heavenly vocation it obviously involves sacrifice. The priest or religious sacrifices sex for the sake of His kingdom, so that instead

of his love being focussed on one person it can be shared among the multitudes.

Since we live in a sex saturated western world celibacy also gives a credible witness to the value of chastity and self-control. That doesn't mean that many men in the priesthood haven't failed in the vows and gone off the rails. Some shallow people say that is a good reason for priests to get married and get rid of celibacy. It's like saying that since so many marriages end in divorce we should get rid of marriage.

The man or woman who chooses to forego genital sexual expression for the sake of the kingdom demonstrate that he or she is not bound by and uncontrollable libido. The grace of Christ is there for those who find the keeping of the celibate or married vows difficult. But celibacy itself is a gift to the church. Without it the catholic priesthood would be devalued.

Consecrated celibates are not meant to condemn themselves to a life of isolation from the opposite sex. That is not the will of Christ. Think of some of the great catholic saints who were celibate: Francis and Clare, Vincent and Louise, John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila, Francis De Sales and Jane De Chantal. Without each other the above people would not have achieved half as much. The Pope says that in these situations some people have 'suspicious' minds and believe there is 'monkey business' going on. Since bondage to lust is all they know in their own hearts they project that on to everyone else.

Some of these masters of suspicion contend that celibacy is to blame for the various sexual problems of the clergy we've heard about recently. They are the same people who say celibacy is unnatural. Yes, there are celibates and married people who fail but God offers special grace to both groups to resist temptation and see their vocations as gifts from God. Would priests be better off married?

This is what a convert married priest with children has to say: "Remember married men are not perfect. Married clergymen are workaholics. Married clergymen are immature. Married clergymen have affairs. Married clergymen have drink problems. Married clergymen same sex attraction and abuse children. When a clergy marriage breaks down it is usually disastrous and scandalous and the hurt and pain ripple right through the whole parish. I don't mean to paint a horrible picture of married clergy--just reminding people that

it's not all quite as happy and wonderful as they seem to think. Believe me there will be equal, if not greater problems if we opt for a married clergy".

Celibacy does not cause sexual disorder. Sin does. And getting married does not cure sexual disorder. Christ does. Did not someone say that 'sin' is a good twisted in the wrong direction? It could be said that the sexual confusion of our world is simply the human desire for heaven gone berserk. Those who are 'eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom' should shine as a bright witness to the fact that our ultimate fulfilment rests in God. As Augustine says: 'you have created us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee'