

## The Joy of Living Celibacy for the Kingdom

By Fr. John Linden and Dawn Hausmann

### What are they saying about it?

The first response that most people give to the thought of living a celibate lifestyle voluntarily throughout one's entire life on earth is often negative. It may be something like, "I would *never* want to do that," or "what a *burden* that must be." Such a choice may even be attributed to a psychological or sociological disorder. The fact is that even among those who are discerning a consecrated celibate life, and indeed among those living it (in priesthood, religious life, or other forms of consecrated life) there can be some who see this form of life primarily from a negative standpoint or in a way that considers only the practical aspects of celibacy. "I am *giving up* marriage so that I can be free to do other work for God;" "I am remaining celibate to *avoid* sexual sin or sexual diseases;" "this is a *sacrifice*, but I am willing to offer it." These can all be valid motives for living celibacy but none of them are a good primary reason for accepting a call to a life of consecrated celibacy.

Marriage itself will call for similar efforts in working for God, avoiding sexual sin, and certainly making sacrifices. So the primary reason for choosing to live for a lifetime as a consecrated celibate must be (or eventually must become) positive in nature just as it is positive to follow the Lord's call to any vocation including marriage. It is part of the very nature of a consecrated person to freely desire celibacy in response to the offer of this gift from God; "Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted" (Mt 19:11)). This must be the case or one will never find the deep joy that can and should be found in a consecrated celibate life. Consecrated celibate persons have only one primary motive for their choice and that is "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12).

### Celibacy is finding the goods of marriage

Marital union and children are true goods in this world and therefore when they are freely refrained from for something else the celibate is saying with this choice that they have discerned a call from God to something which, for them, is even more desirable and in reality is a different form of the same goods. The consecrated celibate is still seeking a spousal relationship, intimacy and parenthood in this life on earth just as much as married persons are. However, for the celibate it comes in the form of a heavenly spousal relationship with God that is deeply intimate and truly life-giving and is also a spiritual motherhood or fatherhood that is beyond the bonds of blood

Just as the love of the spouses in marriage is meant to be expressed in a gift that brings new life into the world so the celibate's love for God in Jesus Christ and for all of his children is truly fruitful and life giving. Spiritual parenthood is a very important aspect in the life of the consecrated celibate and is also a way that they continue to live out their sexual identity in this world. Spiritual fathers, for instance, are men who father in a masculine way, leading, guiding, and providing in spiritual ways for their children even if these children are not their own biological offspring. Spiritual mothers are women who truly mother with all of their femininity intact utilizing great patience and care while nurturing their spiritual sons and daughters into the life of Christ. The celibate St. Paul speaks of this life-generating gift in a spiritual way when he addresses the Galatians, "My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!" (Gal 4:19)

Consecrated celibacy also involves a profound love affair or a deep union with the One who is Love itself. Lived well, the celibate life is very fulfilling and well worth the sacrificing of opportunities for

earthly forms of spousal and parental relationships. It offers the celibate an opportunity to live spiritual and heavenly forms of those same relationships. The consecrated celibate is not running from something but rather is running to something, or more accurately, to Someone.

### **Celibacy seeks the greatest desires of the heart**

“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.” (Mt 13:45, 46) Consecrated celibacy for the Kingdom is a unique relationship with God that bears fruits meant to be shared by all even by those who are not called to live as consecrated persons. The consecrated celibate centers his or her entire being around their relationship with God and provides an example for all to learn from. Even those in marriage were called to live a form of temporary celibacy prior to marriage and so it is well for those discerning marriage to understand the gifts offered in celibacy. This temporary celibacy should be for them a time to grow in their individual relationship with Jesus Christ so that, when they enter marriage, Christ will be the center and strength of their sacramental bond.

Those who are called to live celibacy for the Kingdom permanently, far from taking away from the goods of marriage, actually confirm those goods for all by reminding all about the Source of those goods; namely God. No earthly marriage will ever bring true joy if it is not first lived out in relation to and in communion with the marriage that each soul lives with Christ. Consecrated celibates remind us of this first marriage. Such a gift from heaven helps us all to keep our focus on God which is especially important when earthly relationships do not meet our expectations. The example of the celibate leads us to focus our deepest attentions on God and helps prevent us from being tempted to see anyone other than God (even an earthly spouse) as our “savior.”

Therefore, as we can already see, living consecrated celibacy is not a negative thing at all. The better one lives a holy and loving life of celibacy, the more that person forgets what it was that they gave up and focuses on what they have gained and at the same time helps others to focus on the higher things as well. For the one called to consecrated celibacy this is the focus that fulfills all the desires of their heart.

### **Understanding our sexuality**

To understand celibacy it is important to have a good understanding of human sexuality because celibacy will call for the strength to make certain renunciations in the order of sexuality. However, before we can accurately explore this topic we must quickly recognize that human sexuality is about much more than just sexual intimacy. We are sexual beings from the beginning of our existence which comes long before any of us are able to experience sexual intimacy and we will be sexual beings for eternity where we will no longer experience an earthly form of sexual intimacy and yet will experience the fullness of communion with God and with all the saints in a way that will be far greater than earthly sexual intimacy. Sexuality as a whole involves our being created for the purpose of forming personal relationships. Not only is the sexuality of the celibate never to be denied but it is actually expected to be lived out to the full as the celibate too was created for personal relationships just as much as any married person was created for such relationships.

Our sexuality reveals a relational aspect of human nature orienting us outside of ourselves and toward an “other”. It is found in the complementarity of the two sexes, male and female, that we specifically see this ordering of each and every one of us outward. Both the male and the female aspects of human nature come from God and therefore so does the reality of the male-female complementarity come from God. It is through the uniqueness of both the male and female aspects of the one human nature

that something about the nature of God is revealed to the world. This also reveals the truth that both the male and female will find their ultimate complementarity in God alone. For this reason it is possible for the consecrated celibate to find fulfillment of sexual complimentary while on earth; a fulfillment that is just as complete as one can find in earthly marriage, and in certain aspects even more so. For all those who go to heaven will “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mt 22:30) and yet will be totally fulfilled.

### **Celibacy is a mature embrace of the opposite sex**

As a matter of prudence and nature most of the consecrated celibate’s deepest relations with others in this world will be and should be with members of the same sex. However, there are many examples of celibate saints who indeed held some forms of spiritually mature and yet spiritually intimate relationships with members of the opposite sex. Just as for the married couple, some of what the celibate will understand about a heavenly complementarity with God will be discovered in the opposite sex here on earth. Most consecrated celibates will still be engaged in the world except for those who are cloistered or are in strict monastic settings. In their engagements with the opposite sex (including parents and siblings of the opposite sex, congregants, spiritual directors, friends, etc.) the celibate is called to grow in the understanding of God through the different approaches, concerns, interests, etc. that are found in the opposite sex. For example, how is a priest going to successfully and fruitfully lead a congregation that is fifty or more percent female if he doesn’t take time to get to know women on a deeper level than what can be gained just in formal settings? The celibate Blessed John Paul II could never have written the books, encyclicals, and Wednesday Audiences (which have now become a unique “Theology of the Body”) on the subject of male-female complementarity if he had only known things strictly from the male perspective. And he would never have come to know things from the female perspective had he not developed some deeper and more engaging relationships with women friends. Just as for the married person, the opposite sex is also meant to draw the celibate outside of themselves in unique ways that only the opposite sex can. However, living as a celibate in the world will require proper boundaries when engaging any member of the opposite sex (not to mention proper boundaries between members of the same sex); just as we see boundaries held fast to by all of the saints. Now boundaries will inevitably vary between consecrated persons as spiritual maturity varies between them and boundaries will also vary by degree of relationships (family, friends, acquaintances), but in the end for the consecrated celibate only God will become the deepest “other” in their lives on a level that is a total exchange of self-gift. God alone becomes their deepest and most intimate friend. We will explore some considerations below that can help make relationships in the world healthy, holy and balanced for the consecrated celibate.

### **Celibacy is an expansion of love for Christ**

Sexuality encompasses the whole being of a person – body, mind and spirit. In this regard, any sexual act is meant to be a total gift of oneself to one’s spouse, in and through the mind, spirit, and body (knowing, loving, and embracing). Just as much as the giving of one’s body to the spouse is an aspect of the sexual act in marriage, so the giving of one’s thoughts toward the good of the spouse and the gift of one’s spiritual life (the interior life of love in and through God) are also meant to be aspects of the marital act. An attempt of the sexual act that is void of any of these three offerings is not a full gift and therefore is not a full sexual act.

Celibates also work to offer their whole body, mind and spirit to their heavenly spouse knowing that Jesus desires nothing less than their whole being and whole attention. Celibates live and breathe for one thing only and that is to learn to love their spouse and what he loves more fully throughout their lifetime. “An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord...An

unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit.” (1 Cor 7:32, 34)

Though the celibate does not exercise the “normal” gift of bodily expression in the love of their spouse, the reality is that the bodily gift is still being offered. The celibate gift of bodily expression begins with the act of refraining from sexual intimacy. It must be remembered that a saved gift is still just as much a gift as is one that is given. Yet, consecrated celibates don’t just offer their body to their spouse by refraining from a gift but actually offer their bodies in other profound ways. Like their spouse who offered his whole being in every act while on earth (culminating in his gift on the Cross) so the celibate offers his or her body along with mind and spirit in everything they do in this world. “So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma” (Eph 5:1,2).

### **Celibacy is an expansion of love for others**

Though this body, mind and spirit offering is never made through a sexual act, it nevertheless is a way of intimately loving Christ through sacrificial offerings to the others he loves in this world and this brings great joy to the celibate. The celibate St. Paul wrote to his spiritual children in Corinth, “I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?” (2 Cor 12:15) St. Paul felt the deep intimacy of Christ’s love for him in the outpouring of himself for others.

Loving those whom Christ loves not only allows the consecrated celibate to experience Christ’s profound love for others but also allows the celibate to begin to experience Christ’s love for themselves. The consecrated celibate actually enters into Christ’s very love for others which is an expansion of love to its greatest heights. Celibacy offers the opportunity to exercise more self-giving love to more people and in doing so expands the ability to actually receive the love of God through those people. Loving truly as Christ loved others is to love them intimately just as he did. This is a radical love that sees all other people as God’s children and as one’s own brothers and sisters. “And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother.’” (Mt 12:49, 50)

### **Celibacy is communion**

Consecrated celibacy is not meant to be lived in isolation. Many celibates live in some form of community such as in religious life. All forms of living celibacy will call for friendships that are interpersonal. However, celibates must be cautious with regards to particular or special friendships, especially with members of the opposite sex. In reality all friendships for the consecrated celibate should include some form of communal aspect. Circles of friends help to preserve the integrity of healthy and holy celibacy. All friendships for the celibate must remain rightly ordered toward the building up of an exclusive spousal relationship with Jesus and toward the building up the true good of the other and of the self. If any of these elements are missing then true friendship does not exist. Of course, all three of these elements of friendship will take constant work and so the celibate must always keep these goals as the primary focus of any friendship.

Special or close friends in the world should lead the consecrated celibate into a deeper relationship with Christ and to a more honest understanding of humanity. Such friendships can and should entail lighter interactions that are more recreational in nature as well as deeper interpersonal sharing. Relationships in this world should never lead the celibate to be too clingy or needy of others but at the same time will ensure that the celibate does not become too cold or prudish. The consecrated celibate should never fear sharing their life with others in the world. However, they should always be looking beyond the

world at the greater life to come and at the Eternal Spouse who is precisely the one whom they wish so greatly to share their life with and also to share with their earthly friends.

Finally, all close friendships with others should lead to a humble and honest sharing of the self. When the celibate allows others to see their weaknesses this can prevent the celibate from becoming pretentious and can help avoid the development of a “cult of personality” brought on by interior isolation. Marriage can naturally help the spouses remain humble because they cannot hide their faults from each other indefinitely. Celibates, especially those who live alone in the world, need to build up friendships for this same purpose of being humbled into remaining honest with themselves and with others. However, the celibate never seeks friendships for reasons that are only good for the self but also seeks to provide the same help in return to his or her friends keeping them humble and honest as well.

### **Male and Female He Made Them**

The way in which celibacy is approached can be different for the male and the female respectively. This difference, however, is not clearly delineated and what may be most prominent in the approach of one sex is certainly not absent in the other; both male and female share similar qualities in their living out of celibacy. As was already mentioned, all aspects of masculinity and femininity come from God and God is neither male nor female in his divine essence. But for the sake of exploring some of the ways that celibates orient their extraordinary relationship with Christ we will categorize them into a male and female approach even if it is really not necessarily so differentiated along gender lines.

### **Friend of the Bridegroom – Male Celibacy**

For the male it can be difficult to imagine his celibacy in the context of spousal love. And yet the male celibate is called to a deep love that is indeed quite intimate and spousal. Even his sexuality is offered to Christ in a unique way as was spoken of earlier. A priest, for example, may find a deep sense of intimacy with God while exercising the sacraments clearly discerning the power of the Spirit of God working within himself through these gifts from heaven.

Scripture itself offers the male celibate certain reflections that can help him find complementarity with regard to his spousal relationship with God. In the Book of Wisdom we read, “Therefore I prayed, and prudence was given me; I pleaded, and the spirit of Wisdom came to me. I preferred *her* to scepter and throne, and deemed riches nothing in comparison with *her*, nor did I liken any priceless gem to *her*; because all gold, in view of *her*, is a little sand, and before *her*, silver is to be accounted mire. Beyond health and comeliness I loved *her*.” (Wis 7:7-10)

For the male celibate, love for Christ can also be seen in the form of the deepest manner of friendship; a friendship where nothing is withheld about the self while all is entrusted to the other. It is also a friendship in which everything given by the other is willingly accepted by the self. Love for the male celibate is expressed in his will to suffer all of the sufferings and also share in all of the joys of his most intimate friend.

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and

appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another.” (Jn 15:11-17)

### **Bride of Christ – Female Celibacy**

In many ways, the spousal aspect of celibacy is much more readily assimilated by the woman who is called to this beautiful state of life. Her femininity is readily complimentary to God’s revelation of himself in Christ as the Bridegroom which is also reflected often in the Scriptures:

“As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you.” (Is 62:5)

“My lover speaks; he says to me, ‘Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come!’” (Song of Songs 2:10)

“I remember the devotion of your youth, how you loved me as a bride.” (Jer 2:2)

“Come here. I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” (Rv 21:9)

Even though Jesus’ masculinity is easily seen as complimentary to the woman celibate’s femininity it must be pointed out that this in no way makes life easier in her struggle to conform herself to the one she loves with all her heart. Women too renounce their physical expression of sexuality just as the male celibates do and so they must grow in fully integrated love for God and neighbor in exactly the same way as celibate men are called to do.

Yet, a woman’s natural receptivity can align itself in distinctive ways with the spiritual exercise of receiving Christ as her lover. In so doing, women celibates offer for our imitation unique forms of relational patterns that are helpful in all of our efforts to unify ourselves with Christ, our heavenly Bridegroom. For the woman celibate, intimacy with her Divine Lover eventually become manifested in mystical forms as she begins to see things, taste things, touch things, and even to love things in Him whom she loves as if she is experiencing his experiences and he is experiencing hers.

Male celibates need the example of women celibates in order to understand their own need for becoming profoundly receptive to Christ. We are all called to be oriented toward such intimate receptivity which will be lived out to the full in heaven and yet begins for all of us here on earth. Mysterious as it may seem, in a rightly ordered relationship with God, we are all bride before the divine Bridegroom as both men and women.

### **Celibacy is a Real Call**

A celibate is invited to live for the kingdom of heaven and to seek all things that help lead others to do the same. Consecrated celibates are called to be models for all by bringing every worry and every task appointed to them to their heavenly spouse, Jesus Christ. As the celibate grows in prayer and relationship with Christ they begin to bring his peace into the world in very unique ways. Married couples must be focused on temporal needs in their families while the celibate is free to seek the Lord and his interests in their own interior life and throughout the community. “An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. I

am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction (1Cor 7:32-35)."

Consecrated celibates remind all of us to "seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides" (Mt 6:33). Consecrated celibacy is a generously-lived reminder to all that we are not made to live in this world forever nor were we created to ultimately remain as we are naturally ordered in this world. We are all naturally ordered to live in the married state (even those called to celibacy) but this state of living, as beautiful as it is, is merely an iconic reflection of the Trinity and it is into the Trinitarian life that we will all be joined mystically in heaven.

It is important to note that an invitation from God to live a celibate vocation does not entail the loss of a natural attraction to the opposite sex nor does it call for a complete absence of the attraction to natural marriage. Rather, in the call to celibacy, one will experience a growing desire to go beyond the good of receiving a spouse in this world in favor of the desire for the highest form of marriage – the heavenly marriage.

The desire for the kingdom of heaven calls for radical sacrifices from all of the baptized but celibates in many ways are called to even more radical sacrifices and yet are promised the reward of a more radical return. "Then Peter said, "We have given up our possessions and followed you." He said to them, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive [back] *an overabundant return* in this present age and eternal life in the age to come." (Lk 18:28-30)

### **Time spent with one's Spouse**

Our eternal spouse Jesus Christ is truly present to all of us – body, blood, soul, and divinity, in the Eucharist. It is to the Lord in this unique form of his presence that all should go as often as possible. At Mass the eternal Bridegroom offers his all to the Bride and for the celibate this needs to become an ever deepening form of engagement with Jesus throughout their lifetime just as spouses in the world engage in giving and receiving each other more and more throughout their lifetimes. Holy Communion is a true exchange of bodies between spouses that is not at all unlike that of the exchange between earthly spouses. All are called to this exchange with our divine Spouse but it is all the more essential for the one who longs for no other spouse to engage in Holy Communion as often as possible. Additionally, in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, one sits before the Lord and learns like a true spouse not just to seek comfort and escape from one's own loneliness or struggles, but all the more importantly, to seek just to be in the presence of their Beloved and to share their own presence with him.

### **In Imitation of the Master**

There is definitely a call in all vocations for making a gift of oneself but in consecrated celibacy the individual does so in a manner most closely related to that of the Master who did not marry but came and "gave himself as ransom for all (1Tim 2:6)." Jesus availed himself to all by choosing not to live in a state of earthly marriage. The consecrated celibate chooses to live like the one whom they espouse and for the same reasons: to love God intimately and to passionately love all of his creation as he does.

To give Christ your whole attention and to have everything you are and do be filtered through this reality of spousal union with him is, in a certain sense, the very definition of consecrated celibacy. As in all good marriages the spouses begin to imitate each other and so the celibate who spends a lifetime seeking to be closer to Christ begins over time to act more and more like his or her Heavenly Spouse.

Celibate spousal love is a journey as are all spousal loves. One will not love Christ the first day of ordination, perpetual vows, or consecration, in the same way they will love him on the day they pass from this world and they shouldn't. Love grows and it grows through pain and suffering just as it does through joy and happiness. In a beautiful and holy natural marriage the same thing is experienced as the spouses grow in their love and affection for each other throughout their life together. In the end even the pain experienced in loving a spouse becomes a deep joy because often the pain is rooted in the tearing oneself away from self-interest and opening the door for truly seeking to meet the needs and desires of the "other".

### **Some signs of a celibate vocation**

Before one chooses to offer their life exclusively to the Lord they must discern that God is truly calling them to do so and therefore offering them the capacity to accept a life of consecrated celibacy. "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you (Jn 15:16)." Faith is the key to offering the gift of oneself in any vocation and it is most definitely necessary for a celibate vocation. In faith is the gift received and in faith is the gift then offered. Therefore a person must faithfully discern whether God is calling them to this radical form of discipleship. Here are just a few basic things that one may look for in order to *begin* prayerfully discerning whether God is truly calling them to celibacy:

1. You sense a greater than usual yearning for God
2. You desire to be with your Lord often in the Sacraments and in the Scriptures
3. You desire to radically give your life to God and his Church
4. You see earthly life as simply not fulfilling enough and you want more
5. Marriage doesn't seem to be enough to satisfy your great desire to give of yourself to others
6. You have a great desire to serve others because they belong to God: you see others with God's eyes and God's love
7. You have a growing attraction to a particular celibate lifestyle
8. You have a growing awareness of the capacity to live celibacy
9. You desire celibacy for the right reasons as explained in this article
10. Others whom you know to be faithful have asked you to consider a particular vocation that calls for celibacy

### **In the end**

The true call to consecrated celibacy is discerned through the discovery of one thing – a burning desire for Christ that just cannot be quenched by anything other than a radical union with him. This is a love that makes one almost forget all the other loves in the world. It is accompanied by a faith-filled trust that inflames in the person a desire to abandon themselves and their life totally to God.

Jesus is ultimately the spouse of all the baptized on earth, but the consecrated celibate is living out here and now an attempt at the life that will be the fulfillment and reality of all the saints in heaven. In the end, the only way for one to truly understand the great joy of a consecrated celibate spousal love for Jesus Christ in this world is to first be called by God to this gift and then go on to receive and live it out to the fullest. "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those that love him" (1Cor 2:9).

## Suggestions for Further Reading:

Contalamessa, Raniero, OFM Cap, *Virginity: A Positive Approach to Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven*, 1995, Society of St. Paul

Dubay, Thomas S.M., *...And You are Christ's: The Charism of Virginity and the Celibate Life*, 1987, Ignatius

Blessed John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body (Specifically, Part 1, Chapter 3)*, Translated by Michael Waldstein, 2006, Pauline Books and Media

Blessed John Paul II, *The Consecrated Life (Vita Consecrata)*, 1996, USCCB