

The Priesthood Series
Article 8 – Priestly celibacy (Part 3)

Celibacy is truly a sacrifice in “making oneself that way” as Jesus describes. In fact, far from running from sexual contact and marriage out of fear, the one who embraces “celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” must do so by understanding the goodness and value of what he is giving up, what he is sacrificing. We don’t sacrifice things to God that are bad; we sacrifice things that are good. If marriage and sex were dirty or defiling, then giving it up would be a duty, not a sacrifice. That clearly not being the case, celibacy becomes a sacrificial offering as a celibate offers his body “*as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*” (Romans 12:1).

As mentioned previously, the motivation for voluntary celibacy flows from a desire for the “*Kingdom of Heaven*” and “*for the Lord*”. In short, the foundation of celibacy, its primary inspiration, is love for God and service of his Kingdom. This is the same as the foundation for the priesthood itself: Love for God and his Kingdom. And the priest and the celibate desire to serve God and his Kingdom with his whole life. This is the *missionary or apostolic dimension* of celibacy, since it is “*For the Kingdom of Heaven*”.

A friend of mine once said to me: “*Without the Eucharist, celibacy is pointless*”. In other words, a celibate must have a deep union with Christ, and see himself as participating in the “heavenly marriage” (cf. *Revelation 19 and 21*). This union is most fully lived *in this world* through our union with Christ *in the Eucharist*.

This is the *prophetic dimension* of celibacy, that it is a prophetic sign to the world of our ultimate calling, which is complete and perfect union with God himself. As Jesus says, “*In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels*”. “Like the angels” meaning in a perfect union with God. This union with God is also described in the scriptures as a “marriage”, but the difference is that it is a spiritual union with God, not a physical union with another person. There is no human marriage in heaven because there is only one marriage in heaven: Christ and the Church. And the celibate person is a sign already in this world of this future marital union in heaven.

In conclusion, the practice of priestly celibacy is a very good and important discipline of the Church. It is good on a practical level, and especially good on a spiritual level, as the celibate is a sign to the world of our future union with God himself in heaven, where there is no “*marrying or giving of marriage*”. But there is a perfect marital union of *Christ and his bride*, the Church, of which we are all a part.

Perhaps the best summary of celibacy is in this quote from the Second Vatican Council’s document *Prefectae Caritatis*:

“Chastity ‘for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 19:12), which religious profess, must be esteemed as an exceptional gift of grace. It uniquely frees the hearts of men and women (see 1 Cor 7:32-35), so that they become more fervent in love for God and for all humanity. For this reason it is a special symbol of heavenly benefits, and for religious it is a most effective way of dedicating themselves wholeheartedly to the divine service and the works of the apostolate. Thus, for all Christ’s faithful, religious recall that wonderful

marriage made by God which will be fully manifested in the age to come, and in which the Church has Christ alone for her spouse.”

I can testify that I have experienced this “gift” of celibacy in my own life, and thus, I for one, would never change this important discipline of the Church. Celibacy does not take away my freedom, rather, it enables me to love more freely. It truly is a gift of the Spirit, for “*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom*”.

Sources for additional reading:

The Charism of Priestly Celibacy – Edited by John C. Cavadini

Theology of the Body – Pope John Paul II