

EXPERIENCING THE HEART-SPACE

By ANGELA LEWIS

THE VOCATION to the single life is one of the life choices open to us as a way of responding to the call to holiness received in baptism and, as such, should have a distinctive quality and position within the community of the faithful. Our baptismal vocation is unique to each person and the call to holiness is given to all, religious and lay, married and single.

In the Church we do not all walk the same path. Yet we are all called to holiness and we have obtained a faith of equal standing in the righteousness of God.¹

In the early Church the vocation to the single life was both recognized and valued. As time went on there developed a kind of two-tier system in which those who were called to the priesthood or religious life were considered superior to their lay brothers and sisters. This was reflected in the history of spirituality when prayer and various schools of spirituality were based on monastic traditions. The laity who wished to learn more about prayer would be presented with a monastic model which failed to take account of the fact that the lay person's way of praying and of relating to God—as a person living in the world without the special provisions made for prayer found in religious community—are very different.

The single Christian in the Church today experiences a new kind of two-tier system. The majority of lay people are called to the married state and, in coming to acknowledge this, the Church has given married people their rightful place within the community of believers. At the same time, however, this new emphasis on the family has had the effect of making single Christians feel we are on the margins of the Church. It follows that our sexuality is not named and so cannot be owned.

A failure to acknowledge that the single life is a legitimate vocation and a means of responding to the universal call to holiness received in baptism, has led to a sense of alienation among single

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Christians. The fact that one is faced with comments such as, 'what happened that you never married?' or, 'it's never too late you know', indicates that in the eyes of the majority of your fellow Christians, not to have found a man or to have entered a religious community is to be a failure.

Many of these attitudes are changing within society, due to the influence of the feminist movement and the greater economic freedom experienced by women today. However, within the Church attitudes towards singles remain negative rather than positive and the vocation to marriage appears paramount among the lay vocations. Many of these attitudes are deeply rooted in religious and sociological norms which placed emphasis on the importance of preserving the human race or certain religious groups. The role of the woman as wife and mother was of great importance, and the woman was expected to play a subservient role to the male in society. The economic factor also led to women having to be provided for financially, therefore any woman who did not feel called to the religious life would see marriage as the only alternative open to her. These factors led to a situation in which the call to the single life becomes obscured.

What is the experience of the single person in the Church today? It is true to say that for the majority of single Christians our experience is one of being ignored. The Church has failed to give credibility to the single state as a vocation in its own right and so inhibited the task of outlining an appropriate way of looking at single people's sexuality. On 'vocations Sunday' for example, one hears homilies which speak of all the other vocations in the Church, yet even in more enlightened parishes one never hears the single life put forward as a way of responding to one's baptismal call. In order to enable people to discern whether they are called to the single life, they need to be able to reflect on this life style, and on the sexual and spiritual response of single people, with the same degree of openness and encouragement they would experience if they were considering the other vocational options. The single life might be said to be the primary vocation of all human persons; it is important therefore that all should be helped to discern within the community of believers whether they are called to remain in this state or to move into another state of life, such as marriage, priesthood or the religious life.

The single life as calling

Is it in fact possible to see the single life as a calling in its own right? In order to answer this question we need to find criteria on which to base our judgement that the single life is a valid expression of our baptismal vocation and not just a negative life style. There are, I think, certain criteria which are applicable to other vocations which may provide us with a framework for discerning a vocation to the single life. These are: an attraction to the single life which is positive in the sense that individuals feel called to a solitary life in the world and so embrace the single state as a way of living out their baptism rather than accepting the single state as their fate, in a spirit of resignation; a sense of rightness and inner peace, together with a conviction that such a way of life brings with it a deeper awareness of the Lord's love for us, which others experience within their own vocations.

These criteria are applicable to those for whom the call to the single life is a deliberate choice. What of those for whom the single life is discovered through external circumstances, rather than being experienced as an intrinsic call?

External circumstances which may necessitate one living the single life, such as widowhood, or separation and divorce, or simply the failure to meet a suitable partner, do not of themselves constitute a call to the single life. It is only when these circumstances become the means of discovering a call that individuals are able to respond to their situation, and to discern the Lord's call. When the realization comes that God is at work in our lives, then the authentic call to the single life can be discerned. The single vocation must not, however, be seen as being only concerned with the individual's relationship with God, or to be introspective by nature. Rooted in baptism, the single life must include an element of witness and service. The source of this commitment is to be found in the prayerful reflection and growing intimacy with the Lord which are an essential part of the single-life commitment.

In order to develop this intimate relationship with the Lord, the single person needs space and solitude. There is a danger that in order to justify oneself, and to give a tangible reason for one's life style, the single person may become too involved in activities, to the point of failing to develop the kind of prayer life and relationship with the Lord which are essential for anyone trying to live the single life in the world today. Simply because singles are free of family ties others may make unreasonable demands on our time

and energy. Time must be given to enable us as single people to deepen our understanding of vocation and to nurture our relationship with the Lord.

The nature of the witness given by the single Christian will be discerned in the light of the talents we have received and the concrete circumstances of our lives.

The individual apostolate springs from the fact that 'every' lay-person has his or her 'own' vocation and mission in the Church for the world: each one can discern this vocation in the light of the talents received, of the charisms possessed, in the concrete circumstances wherein one lives and works.²

Because the single lay person does not have the support which comes from living in a community setting, it is all the more important that we should be supported in our vocation by our local Christian community and be affirmed by our fellow Christians. Only attentive listening to the Spirit of God will bring about the transformation which will enable single people to see the uniqueness of our call within the Church and to begin to explore what this means for us as sexual people.

A call within the Church

How can the Church help us as single Christians to feel that we have a rightful place within the 'family' of the Church, and meet our special needs? The *Dogmatic constitution on the Church* points how those who are single by choice of circumstance, like our married counterparts, are called to contribute to the Church's holiness and activity.

Those who are widowed and those who have not married have another way of giving the same example, and they make no small contribution to the Church's holiness and activity. Their work is often hard; they must use their countrymen to improve the condition of the whole of society and creation: they must model themselves in active charity on Christ.³

Despite the encouraging tone of this statement, the reality is that the single lay person does not receive guidance from the Church as to how this special vocation is to be lived out, especially in relation to sexuality. The rise of the status of the family has led

to marriage being given its rightful status within the Church. Courses, support groups and an abundance of literature all exist to enable married Christians to live out their vocation. Such organizations as Marriage Encounter provide a situation in which priests and married couples are enriched by a mutual exchange which enables them to grow in understanding their vocations. Single Christians do not benefit from a similar provision.

Every other vocation is recognized and celebrated by some form of liturgical gathering within the community. For the single Christian such celebrations only serve to emphasize our non-status within the Church. Ignored and unsupported by the family of the Church, as single Christians we come to question the validity of our inner conviction that our call is from the Lord and is a legitimate expression of our baptismal vocation and a means of responding to the universal call to holiness.

Pastoral care and the single person

How can the Church recognize the place of the single person within the community of believers and offer support on a par with that offered to other members of the Christian family? One model of support is found in the suggestions given in the *Constitution on the Church in the world today*, on the ways in which the priest may give pastoral support to married people. The pastoral methods suggested include preaching, liturgical worship and other spiritual aids, to support them humanely and patiently, and to fortify them in charity. The document also calls for the recognition of the true personal status of married people, made in God's image.

The suggestions made here in connection with the married state can be applied to the single state and provide a working model for the care of single Christians in the Church today. A positive recognition of the true personal status of singles, rather than the negative attitude which for the most part exists today, would enable single Christians to experience a sense of belonging to the community instead of our present sense of alienation. If homilies occasionally dealt with the call to the single life, and the special needs of single people and, alongside the regular family Mass, a Mass for single people were celebrated, single Christians would feel that we have a positive contribution to make to the life of the Church. The same document suggests that married people should be given support by advice and practical help in order to train them for family, social and apostolic life. Here again we can apply

this model of pastoral care to the single vocation and to the nurturing of a helpful view of sexuality.

What are the special needs of single Christians which the Church fails to meet? Growth in the Christian life for the single person, as for every other Christian, means coming to understand the uniqueness of one's call, that is to say learning self-acceptance and growing in relationship with God. For single adults the whole area of sexuality is a special area of concern, as we strive to come to understand our own sexuality and accept it as a gift from God. To live as a single person is to encounter a particular experience of being a Christian, with its own challenges and its own unique commitment to loving God and neighbour. It is an experience of being human with all the desires and needs of a human being, many of which call for us to enter into deep relationships with others, including members of the opposite sex.

If the single life is to be lived out as a positive response to God's call in my life, then I must discover this call involves for me at a deeply personal level as a woman with all the needs and desires of a woman: to fail to face this is to fail to respond fully to the call.

The place of sexuality

What then are the needs and desires which I must come to terms with if I am to respond to the life-style to which I am called, in a positive and creative manner? My experience of my own sexuality, while being essentially the same as that of all human persons, is unique in as much as my whole experience of who I am in relation to others is unique.

As a single person trying to respond to God's call without the support of a community which provides a framework in which to explore the meaning of one's vocation, I need to create my own boundaries which will enable me to grow as a human person and to live out my vocation in an authentic manner. These boundaries are particularly important because, unlike those whose life commitment is clearly seen and recognized, I not only have to explore my own boundaries, but need to find a way of making them known to others.

Living as we do in a culture where self-fulfilment is seen in terms of an invitation to fulfil one's own personal needs in a self-indulgent way, the recognition that one is a sexual being, with a sex drive which makes its presence felt, presupposes that the desire for sexual experience must be fulfilled if one is to be considered

fully human. This is the climate within which the single Christian, committed to celibacy, has to work out his or her own vocation. Coming to recognize my own sexuality in a positive and honest manner will call for a high degree of self-knowledge and openness. Fear may enter in and obscure vision, and prevent me from entering into any close relationships. There is a need to see that my sexuality goes beyond what is limited to genital pleasure, and the desire to experience the most intimate relationship open to any human person. My sexuality includes who I am as a woman, and colours all my relationships because it is part of my way of being in the world.

The sex drive is one of the most powerful forces in the whole of human experience. To live as a single person committed to celibacy is not to negate this drive but to direct it in a positive and creative manner. I know that I am going to experience a genital response in certain situations, simply because I am a sexual being. Such occasions remind me of the gift of sexuality which God has given me, for which I should feel gratitude and not fear. It also reminds me of the gift which I have received in being called to live the single life.

In order to own my sexuality I need to be affirmed as a woman. This will mean being prepared to give and receive love in a way which enables me to know the joy of deep friendship and companionship with others, including men. I need to be valued and loved for myself, not simply for what I do. Some experience of intimacy is necessary if I am to discover what it means to be loved and cherished by others. In my loving of others in a non-possessive and non-genital way, I come to know the unique character of celibate love which frees me to love others in a way which can never be exclusive, but must always be inclusive. So I am freed to love those whom the Lord sends.

In my relationship with others there will obviously be degrees of intimacy and friendship; when I enter into a close relationship with a man it is essential that both of us know and understand the ground rules. I cannot enter into such a relationship without making the other person aware of my commitment to the single life. On my part I need to be careful not simply to use the other person to fulfil my own needs; to do so would be to treat the other person as an object, and to dehumanize him. There is a very real need to define boundaries and to make certain that we are speaking a common language. My signs of friendship and affection may

mean one thing to me and something else to the other person, therefore we need to take time to clarify things. The different ways in which men and women experience their own sexuality also need to be recognized. To love other people is to want them to become the person God has called them to be and precludes any kind of relationship which would prevent this.

Love and friendship are gifts from God which enable us to grow in our self-understanding and in our love of God. Being called to the single life as a permanent state excludes the experience of sexual intercourse as a way of loving; it does not however exclude loving others in a way which includes sexuality. My married friends have helped me to understand more fully my own need to be life-giving, and to nurture life in others. Through sharing in their understanding of married love I have come to see more clearly the meaning of celibate love. Being a god-parent has also helped me to get in touch with my own feelings about motherhood, and the pain of holding a child in my arms while realizing that I will never fully experience what it means to hold a child of my own. The fact is that any close relationship will always be a reminder that my way of loving and experience of my own sexuality includes the pain of knowing that such relationships cannot be exclusive, and are therefore going to include an element of uncertainty.

To enter into a close relationship is to own my need to receive from others as well as to give to others in love. With those whom I come to see as being significant others for me, I am able to share my journey in a way which enables both of us to discover what God is calling us to be. This provides a situation in which mutual support enables us to grow in love for each other, for God and for others.

Such a journey calls for a guide who will provide an environment in which to explore unknown territory and provide a space in which to get in touch with one's deepest feelings. Through prayer and reflection on my daily experience, I come to know God and to discern his working in my life. I experience his unconditional love for me. I am able to face my own sexuality and to see how the pain and tensions I experience in loving unconditionally and in a non-exclusive way are part of God's call to enter into a close personal relationship with him. As a single person I experience in a special way the heart-space which only God can fill. Through sharing my journey with a spiritual companion I am able to discern

God's call and to discover how prayer can lead me to see my emptiness in relationship to my capacity to be filled by God.

Prayer and solitude play an important role in the spiritual growth of all who seek to develop a close relationship with the Lord. As single people we have a special need to spend time reflecting on our call and rooting ourselves in prayer. Provision for retreats and prayer groups in which we are able to share with other singles would enable us to discover what our call holds for us. God is always calling us beyond ourselves and into a deeper union with him, the single person points to this call and therefore may be said to be an eschatological sign.

Being essentially alone, and experiencing a high degree of independence in terms of decision-making, it would be very easy for the single person to become self-centred. Through being helped to discover one's talents and use them for the service of others, the single Christian also discovers a sense of belonging to the Christian family. If the Church comes to recognize that the single life is a genuine lay vocation, with its own special role to play within the Christian community and that singles have special needs which are not being met at a pastoral level; if it acknowledges this by making the same kind of pastoral provisions that are made for the married laity, a whole section of the Church who have felt themselves to be 'non-people' in the family Church will find their rightful place within the community of believers and the Church will be enriched by their presence.

In my own case, these talents have been revealed in such different ways. I have been surprised to find religious communities asking me to share my own experience as a single woman with them; I have been surprised to find myself leaving the security of working in a Church school to work in a situation that feels much more real, exciting and in line with the gospel, among London's poor and homeless; I have been surprised how people have come to me—old and young, religious and lay—to share their spiritual journey, including their hopes, fears, joys and struggles, their spirituality and their sexuality with me. It would have been hard to imagine all this happening some fifteen years ago.

NOTES

¹ *Dogmatic constitution on the Church*, 32.

² 1986 Synod consultation document, *Ex Ecclesiae coetibus*, 36.

³ *Dogmatic constitution on the Church*, 41.