

CREATIVE CELIBACY

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MY ROOM IS KEPT CLEAN by Agnes. She is about forty years old. She lost her husband fourteen years ago after a serious illness and was left with two children. Since then she has had to work to keep herself and her children, who are everything to her. Even if another husband were to come along, her children would still take precedence. In fact, Agnes lives a celibate life, but it is a most creative one, in which her children and their future take pride of place. Although her celibacy is not voluntary, her creativity shows itself in a very personal way.

The Vow

As celibacy indicates a void, it can only gain meaning if there is a corresponding satisfaction: the bringing up of children, a deep friendship, worthwhile work, the constant memory of a lost partner, and so on. Sometimes, however, celibacy is freely chosen ‘for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 19:12). It then points to the Hereafter, and can be called ‘eschatological’. A vow is taken, and the orientation is changed so that the route now leads towards an indefinite future—but that is all it does. Celibacy cannot be conceived simply as a pointer to what is to come, some ideal to be made concrete only in Christ. It is true that celibacy involves the realisation of that ideal, but in itself it is not an ideal or an ideology, but the working out of an undertaking, something in process. The question is: how can that ideal become reality *hic et nunc*, what does it mean *now*? Is a sacred vow enough to keep celibacy alive and well?

Theology has much to say about this ideal for humanity in a future world, but less when it comes to explaining how the ideal can be realised. Ignatius himself says little:

What pertains to the vow of chastity requires no interpretation, since it is evident how perfectly it should be preserved by endeavouring

to imitate therein the purity of the angels in cleanness of body and mind. (*Constitutions*, VI.1.1 [547])

The long explanations that he gives of the two other vows far exceed what is said in this extremely short paragraph. The *Complementary Norms* (nn.144–148) indicate that fuller explanations were sought in recent years, for example in the eighth decree of the 34th General Congregation (1995) and in the longer treatment in the decrees of the 35th General Congregation (2008). However, in the latter's decree 2, nn.18–19, there is only mention of the availability that celibacy can provide for liturgy and pastoral work, and of the 'friendship in the Lord' that celibacy can provide. Are these sufficient answers to the questions that members of religious orders are raising today?

A Love That Gives

The example of the young widow mentioned earlier allows for further thought. When celibacy is not voluntary there are various factors that can be crucial. Here we find an example of someone who is not simply settling for affection, or being instinctively friendly, or just being a part of a social institution: this is a person who finds it normal to give love. That is how she expresses her humanity. In this way she herself shows what God is, since it is in God's image that we have been made. Here is a picture of love, of a God who is pure Love, thus of a God who is nothing but love. God's essence is Love. All other characteristics are consequences of that Love. God is ubiquitous, immeasurable, forgiving, eternal, generous, all because God is pure Love. It is a Love that both receives Love and gives Love: as Father, as Son and as Spirit, as parents and children in family life.

In this way, every human being reaches full development only when he or she lives in a similarly concrete and open state in relation to God or to the beings that God has created. In the first instance, there is the spouse: 'male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27). The man comes to first full personhood when he meets with delight the one who will be 'a helper as his partner' (Genesis 2:18, which in the French Bible is translated as '*une aide qui lui soit assortie*' or '*accordée*').¹ But there are other vectors of the love that can bring human beings to their full

¹ *Traduction oecuménique de la Bible* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1975).



humanity: the love parents have for their children, a deep friendship, any effective gesture of kindness towards the poor, with whom Jesus identified himself (Matthew 25: 31–46).

To Work with Heart and Soul for God's World

In a lesser, but by no means insignificant, way, everything that is human or related to the human can be counted as belonging to 'the Kingdom of God': the structures that human beings erect to cope with education, administration, art, politics, science, technology and medicine. Everything that comes into being through human effort, set up and created with heart and soul, belongs to the Kingdom of God. All those who take part, often alongside others, in such meaningful enterprises—in a professional way, and not simply as pastimes or to amuse themselves—give inspiration to others and can lead to a *creative celibacy*. This may become clear through the following six examples.

- A certain priest works in a secondary school, as a physics teacher. Others teach religious education, and his priestly colleagues take care of the liturgical functions. But this man has taught a full timetable, day after day, for many years. He pours his heart and soul into the work. Only at the weekend does he celebrate

Mass. At times, it is not easy for him to be faithful to his celibacy but, as he says to himself, 'No big deal'. Teaching means for him that teacher and pupil become so involved in the subject that the teacher makes physics come alive. That is his passion and his life. Physics fascinates him as a teacher and is central for him. But he also cares for his pupils. He is particularly aware that the weaker pupils find physics difficult, so he does his best to keep them abreast of the syllabus. In other words, his great aim is to humanise the subject, to integrate the pupil with the subject matter. Such an integration is surely best represented by the God-man: *ipsa assumptione creatur* ['creation takes place by the taking-on of the human']. Here, the teacher's heart and soul provide the key.

- Robert Chaves has been a priest in Avignon since 1947. Over more than fifty years he has been successively a youth chaplain, parish priest and vicar for culture. As a resident of the city, he has, from the beginning, offered a helping hand in many small ways and given advice about theatrical activities. He has set up friendly relations with the organizers and participants in the yearly drama festival. He has worked with a group of laypeople in *Foi et Culture*. He has also organized colloquia and presentations by Christian artists at the High Mass in the cathedral. In this way, he has become involved, has organized to a modest extent, and has been in touch with many of the actors.
- Many priests have been active in the academic world. There are, of course, theologians, exegetes, patristic scholars, liturgists, ecclesiastical historians and moralists. Their work keeps them busy day and night in universities, seminaries and study centres, and they are occupied with 'professional' research. However there are others whose lives are dedicated to branches of the natural sciences, or to philosophy, or literary studies, or various socio-economic studies. They also labour, heart and soul, developing their specialities and keeping up a constant, intensive dialogue with their lay colleagues. Their expertise ensures a high quality of scholarship. All are living 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven': they are at the service of a creation which, through human effort, can become fulfilled, docile and fruitful.

- A parish priest had, as a young man, taken a degree in musicology and matriculated *cum laude*. While working in the parish, he continued to develop his musical interests. His celibate state was bearable through his passion for music. Moreover, without that cultural interest his pastoral work would have been limited. Thanks to the courses he gave, his work on examination boards and organizing committees but, above all, by his participation in musical performances, his pastoral work gained another perspective inspired by a deep humanity.
- A certain monk, a man of God, finds his celibacy enriched by a purely cultural component. Thanks to his early literary training, he has a special taste for the great poets, such as Ida Gerhardt,² and can pass this on. Such an ability allows for a deeper understanding of the Word of God in the Bible, but here it is the strictly cultural aspect that is worth noting: anyone who devotes him- or herself, heart and soul, to some cultural activity—any activity that helps to humanise the world—is on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven and makes celibacy a creative thing.
- A member of a religious order spent his life taking care of psychiatric patients. Such an occupation completely fulfilled him in his celibacy. Even when he retired, he continued to live in the clinic where he had worked all his life. Clearly his love for his patients was boundless.

In all these cases it is not just that a vacuum is filled by what are commonly called ‘good works’; rather a growth in humanity takes place. There is a link here with the process of deification mentioned in Genesis (1: 27) and Colossians (1: 15–20). What happens with involuntary celibacy—the growth of the humane quality in the world, whatever form that may take—also has an essential part in a celibacy undertaken for the Kingdom. And when that does not happen, the celibate life goes off the rails, it begins to crack at the seams, or starts to show sure signs of neglect.

When the priest on a Sunday says to his parishioners, *Ite, missa est*, he gives them a mission for the week. But that mission applies also to

² Ida Gerhardt (1905–1997), Dutch poet, classicist and teacher.



himself. He cannot withdraw on to some holy cloud. Even enclosed contemplatives or hermits isolated in their cells have a professional job to do, which is not simply some part-time occupation or the means to earn a living, but the sign that each is fully engaged in the business of being human. His or her existence is also a stewardship.

The examples given illustrate how occupations that are fully human can be a great support to the practice of voluntary celibacy: they serve, as it were, as a ‘catalyst’. And without such activities, celibacy would appear to be very difficult, as there is a great distance between daily living and the ideal of the Kingdom of Heaven. As Pascal said: ‘Whoever wants to act the angel, acts the beast’.³ Round about the year 1530, the poet Anna Bijns, in her *Refrains*, very strongly criticized the corruption and lack of culture common among priests and members of religious orders. When they—on the very eve of the Reformation in the Netherlands—reacted by dismissing her works as that of a peasant, just ‘womanly gossip’, they confirmed the deterioration in the Church, a malady that was affecting both head and limbs.

Life Prayed Over

In 1988 Professor Van de Leeuwstichting suggested that a church building should only be hired out for those functions which could be considered ‘preparatory to prayer’. So, in what was a church, a book

³ Blaise Pascal, *Penseés*, translated by Honor Levi (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 128.

sale or a concert would be more appropriate than a dance or a boxing-match. There is a link between prayer and cultural activities. Prayer is not 'otherworldly'. Belief and culture are extensions of one another, and refer back to one another. Do not both have something essential to say about the Covenant? And is there not a mutual collaboration between the gradual humanising of the world and the search for God?

In the prayer-life of Pierre Favre (1506–1546), 'devotion' is closely related to the secular, which frequently underlies it. Favre was still living in a world in which the sacred and the everyday were closely mixed, where the incidental could suddenly become crucial and the most important become commonplace, where heaven and earth seemed to touch. Whenever he was making a journey through an area he would encounter what was specifically sacred to that place. Spain, Catalonia, France, Savoy, Flanders and the Rhineland: each had their cities with local patron saints and particular devotions. In his *Memoriale* on 14 August 1542, in preparation for 15 August, he writes:

At first vespers of the Assumption I found great spiritual devotion when I was in the cathedral of our Lady of Speyer. This was because the ceremonies, the lights, the organ, the chanting, the splendor of the relics and the decorations—all these gave me such a great feeling of devotion that I could not explain it. I blessed the person who had placed the votive lights there, lit them, and arranged them in order, and also the person who had left an income for that purpose. Likewise I blessed the organ, the organist, the benefactors and others, as well as all the priestly vestments that I saw and had been laid ready there for the worship of God. So too the choir and the sacred music sung by the boy choristers, and I blessed in the same way the reliquaries and those who sought out relics and adorned them fittingly when found Similarly I realized the great goodness and mercy that God our Lord shows to all and to every one of those who give something of their own for the public *cultus* of God and of his saints, whether the work of their hands, a gift of money, the offer of advice, or some other thing.⁴

As Pierre Favre makes clear, the devotion described here is not simply intercessory prayer. What is at stake is to seek God with heart and soul, individually and communally, in every encounter, and in all

⁴ Pierre Favre, *Memoriale*, in *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, translated by Edmond C. Murphy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), n. 87.

that surrounds us, in every thing that, according to Genesis 1:28, can be placed under human dominion, all created objects and phenomena: human history, language, potentiality. We can find this in the experience of Ignatius in Manresa, and in the words of the 35th Jesuit General Congregation about 'a fire that kindles other fires'.⁵ Earlier, the previous General Congregation, in its decree on chastity, had insisted that:

... the individual Jesuit ... ought to see to it that he can give both his feelings and his creativity appropriate expression, and he is to develop an educated sensibility for the humane achievements of life as are found in the arts, literature, music, etc.⁶

The 35th General Congregation teaches⁷ that, after Ignatius had experienced the vision at the Cardoner, reality became transparent to him, enabling him to see God working in the depths of everything. As we continue to contemplate in our everyday world, we are enabled to find a divine life in the middle of all that is happening around us. It is in this world that we find traces of God and are able to make God ever more present to us. 'For ultimately there is no reality that is only profane for those who know how to look.'⁸ In our prayer we contemplate the Lord in his relation with the Father, but also as one sent to humankind. There is a tension here between the mystical and active service:

The grace we receive as Jesuits it so to be and to go with him, looking on the world with his eyes, loving it with his heart, and entering into its depths with his unlimited compassion.⁹

Conclusion

As long as we seek to live close to God in the middle of real happenings, then the vow of celibacy can develop in all that is human and humane. This vow is not simply a question of being faithful to a given word. It has to blossom from a cultural root. On the one hand what is promised by the individual and looks forward to another reality, can, on the other

⁵ *Decrees and Documents of the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (Oxford: Way Books, 2008), decree 2, nn. 4–15.

⁶ *Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), decree 8, n. 32, 125.

⁷ *Decrees and Documents of the 35th General Congregation*, decree 2, n. 5, 38.

⁸ *Decrees and Documents of the 35th General Congregation*, decree 2, n. 10, 41.

⁹ *Decrees and Documents of the 35th General Congregation*, decree 2, n. 15, 45.

hand, only find fulfilment in the encounter with men and women and in its humanising effect on creation. As François Varillon has said: 'It is by humanizing that I can divinize', and, 'Christ divinizes our humanizing human activity'.¹⁰

Those who take a voluntary vow of celibacy are not quite the same as others on the road to the Hereafter. They are seeking, with heart and soul and in a professional way, to build up and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Celibacy is built on a promise, on a commitment to some cultural domain, and on intense prayer. In the words of Matthew, it is 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19:12). And when celibacy is not properly nurtured, that may be a sign that there is a lack of longing for God, or a lack of trust in God. But one should also raise a different question: is there a superficial, inexperienced or incomplete commitment to being fully engaged in the human world? In other words, is there a cultural void?

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¹⁰ François Varillon, *Joy of Faith, Joy of Life*, translated by Maurice Verrier (Sherbrooke: Éditions Paulines, 1993), 83.