

CELIBACY AND AFFECTIVE MATURITY

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THERE IS a prayer of Teilhard which provides the keynote for an essay on celibacy and maturity: 'O Jesus, help me to become human'. To be fully human is in itself to be an adult christian. Often divorced from their own humanity, much given to the uncritical bandying about of the word 'divinization', and somewhat prone to angelism, christians have come almost to forget that the Son of Man 'put himself out' in the strongest sense of that phrase – to teach us to be human.

The conciliar documents, particularly *Optatam Totius* and *Perfectae Caritatis*,¹ insist on the close relationship which exists and must exist between maturity and celibacy. Maturity is as necessary for celibacy as it is for marriage. For to be mature is to be capable of loving, of giving and of receiving. Marriage and celibacy alike presuppose this capacity, even though love is lived out in a distinct manner in each case.

Before considering the question of maturity in detail, I would like to emphasize one or two points which seem to me of major importance in our present situation. First, celibacy should not be identified with the unmarried state. Many people are unmarried, few lead the celibate life. I would hold furthermore, that a truly celibate life can only be led by mature people. (This, of course, gives rise to a crucial question. All religious are unmarried, and in the latin church, priests as well; do they lead the celibate life?)

Secondly, celibacy is the result of a free choice. No one indeed denies this, yet so often the principle is belied by practice. 'Liberty of choice' implies a clearly defined alternative, present not only to the intellect, but on the experiential level. It implies, further, that inner psychological freedom which constitutes personal autonomy. Certainly, any individual living in society is subject to certain conditioning factors, but these need to be conscious and restricted to certain limits. A point which particularly deserves notice is the

¹ Cf *Optatam Totius* 10, 11; and *Perfectae Caritatis* 12.

importance of personal autonomy in regard to certain privileged figures such as parents and superiors, since the characteristic 'family' terminology of religious life (Father, Mother, etc.) is liable to suggest that the aim of religious celibacy is to reproduce a family-type cell. Such a model has not always helped individuals to achieve their own social autonomy. Important, too, is the necessity of a personal autonomy, whereby the individual is as free as possible (complete freedom is, alas, unattainable) from those aggressive or passive reactions which are basically reflexes proper to childhood.

In the case of priests, there is the further difficulty that all too often celibacy is not freely chosen for itself. A familiar complaint among those who have left the priesthood in recent years is that their celibacy, if not imposed, was at least chosen for secondary and highly pragmatic reasons, in terms of another commitment, namely the ministerial priesthood. This is not the place to discuss the pros and cons of priestly celibacy. I want simply to insist that in too many cases the celibacy of priests has not been freely chosen for itself, as the fundamental expression of a way of life, and that there is a danger here which seminary formation needs to recognize. Celibacy must be chosen, and can be chosen, only when an individual perceives – and this after a certain length of experience prior to his perpetual engagement – that for him this is the most meaningful way to live out his christian commitment of service, in regard to God, to others and to himself.

Self-acceptance

Religious celibacy does not consist primarily in renunciation or sacrifice. It is a way of loving. And the gift of oneself in love is tied to one's own self-image and to one's acceptance of this image. Genuine love and self-giving are impossible for someone who has not learnt from experience that he himself can be loved. It is only when the individual realizes that he is important for someone else that life takes on a meaning. So long as we are strangers to this experience of being loved for what we are, of being accepted in our entirety, we remain incapable of genuine love. As research in religious psychology has shown, children from broken homes, who have grown up in a joyless, over-rigid atmosphere, never knowing the experience of love, are more liable to abandon their faith as adults than those reared in an atmosphere of acceptance and affection. If they cannot believe that they themselves are the objects of God's love, it is small wonder that they cannot love God and others. The point has a particular

bearing on the subject of celibacy, for it is beyond doubt that many have chosen celibacy not from fear of loving, but from the fear of being loved; of receiving from another the exacting love which demands growing up. They have never known such love.

Giving, then, supposes the ability to receive, and perhaps we too easily forget that Christ himself was one who could receive. In accepting other people's love, allowing Mary Magdalen to kiss his feet, and Mary and Martha to busy themselves, in characteristically feminine fashion, with his needs, he was able to reveal his own love. Far from being signs of weakness on his part, episodes like these testify to his complete acceptance of himself as dependent.

This acceptance of a 'self' who can be loved implies being at ease with the entirety of oneself, not only on the emotional or spiritual level, but also as bodily; and I have often been struck by the large number of religious, both men and women, whose attitude to their own bodies is to some degree one of rejection. Yet here too the general point made above holds true: to love other people (and I can only love a 'body-person'), it is necessary to have accepted one's own body, not just as a source of pain, or a barrier to communication, or an envelope which cannot be laid aside, but as an integral part of oneself as a means of communication and expression necessary for communion with others. Our celibate love, then, needs bodily expression, since this is an essential element in any true and fully human love.

While this acceptance of the body as a means of expression is of vital importance, one would need to be blind to be unaware of the attendant dangers. A 'non-reasonable' use of our bodies is as perilous as a more or less total denial of them. It is a question, of course, of balance; but the balance has not always been respected in the traditional formation of priests and religious. And it is failure on this score which lies at the origin of much crisis and imbalance: the inability to establish satisfying friendships and social relationships, the sudden re-emergence of repressed sexuality (often further complicated by guilt and scrupulosity) and the inability to undertake a permanent commitment. What is often lacking in such cases is what psychologists call 'integrated sexuality'. In the adolescent there is a dichotomy between the affective life turned towards others (at least ideally), and a sexuality which is of a narcissist-homosexual type which will frequently find expression in an active period of masturbation. The adult, on the other hand, needs to arrive at the heterosexual stage, where the erotic and affective aspects of love are

integrated; so that the body itself becomes the means by which the gift of self to another is expressed.

To lay down rules about what is and is not 'permissible' for those dedicated to consecrated celibacy is impossible, and it would be a waste of time to make the attempt. It is for the individual to acknowledge his limitations, realistically, but without false modesty or groundless fears. A negative type of formation, with the emphasis on the 'danger to chastity', is no help towards living an adult love, completely consecrated to the Lord.

The risk of love

No love relationship, whether in marriage or in celibacy, is free from risk. Jesus himself accepted this risk in taking human flesh: 'He came unto his own, and his own did not receive him'.² It is one of the essential marks of a mature celibate life to be able to take sensible risks and to be selective in one's relationships. Celibacy, to be sure, is chosen in order to make possible a more universal, less selective love than that attained in marriage; but it would be simply unrealistic to believe that anyone can enter into friendship with everyone around them. Yet it is common to meet religious men and women living in a state of profound disenchantment with their communities, complaining that people are 'unresponsive' or 'lacking in openness', and trying to resolve their problems by passing from one community to another. For such religious, celibacy provides an easy pretext for demanding from other people complete and constant friendship or attention. This attitude seems to me to be accurately summed up in a phrase of the American psychologist, Karen Horney, whose book *Feminine Psychology* contains a chapter entitled 'The neurotic need of love'.³ This 'neurotic need of love' is surely one of the clearest and most dangerous indications of a lack of maturity in a celibate life.

The manifestations of this may vary considerably. There is the parading of one's own love ('I love you so much that you ought to love me', which really means 'I love you because I need you'); there is the display of weakness, calculated to arouse the other's pity ('without you I am nothing and I can do nothing'); or there are the more or less explicit threats, extending in extreme cases to threats to leave the community or even to commit suicide. The forms can be highly complex, but all conceal the same basic reality:

² Jn 1, 11.

³ Horney, Karen: *Feminine Psychology* (New York, 1967), pp 245-258.

a morbid need to be loved, recognized, accepted and supported. Now people in this situation are incapable of genuine relationships: the other for them is only an instrument. Those who lead the celibate life, if they are to love genuinely, need to have achieved a certain inner liberty enabling them to enter into relationships (whether heterosexual or with a person of the same sex) not because they have 'succumbed' to an emotive need which becomes their sole motivation, but because they have chosen to embark upon a creative relationship.

In order to enter freely into relations of friendship, an individual needs a certain sense of direction in his life, and more specifically, a sense of his religious or priestly engagement; and this is closely bound up with his awareness of having something worthwhile to offer. Too often priests and religious enter upon relationships in order to seek the meaning of their life and their commitment through other people. Ultimately this can only exacerbate an already confused psychological situation; the blind cannot lead the blind. Again, many priests and religious, having never known deep friendship with a woman, embark on such a friendship at the moment when they are least capable of doing so, in the hope of finding solace in a moment of crushing solitude. To provide support in times of crisis, a relationship of this sort would need to form an integral part of life, chosen in full freedom.

Indeed, there are many relationships which so far from being chosen can only be described as 'undergone', as when priests and religious, with no sense of positive direction in their lives, find their own absolute in someone who is prepared to give them a little attention. In such cases, we have to do with nothing less than infatuation, which has nothing at all to do with love.

Deep personal relationships, necessary for a balanced personality, are in fact engendered by fully-lived celibate life. But in particular cases, to judge the maturity of our relationships, and even to know whether they are worth carrying on, will not always be easy. It will often be necessary to have recourse to a third person, capable of helping us to objectify our feelings. In any case, there are basic questions which need to be asked, questions which both enable us to evaluate the maturity of our relationships and provide a programme for the development of affective maturity within the celibate life. At the end of this article I shall propose a series of questions which, while not exhaustive, could provide the basis for an 'examination of conscience'.

The sign of a mature love

If celibacy is a particular way of loving, what are the chief characteristics of this love? The answer, surely, is to be found in the purpose of Christ's own mission: 'I have come in order that the sheep might have life and have it in abundance'.⁴ To call men to life, to be ourselves bearers of life, is the meaning of our celibate consecration and corresponds at the same time to the deepest needs of our human nature. Every man and woman, in marriage as in celibacy, is called upon to give life, and the quality of our love can be judged only by the quality of life which our encounter with others brings forth. Here again Christ's own relationships serve as our example, since his dealings with the men and women of Israel were at the deepest level of their own selfhood. In her love for Jesus, Mary Magdalen's true womanhood came into its own, and she could no longer be the sinner whom the pharisees had known. He restored to the samaritan woman the true sense of the value of her life, and did this, not by preaching morality to her, but by asking a service. 'You are a Jew and you ask me for a drink, *me*, a samaritan?'⁵ It would be easy to multiply similar examples, for the entire gospel is concerned with the gift of life in abundance.

Perhaps it will be well at this point to touch on various forms of behaviour which, far from being creative of life, are ways in which a misunderstood or partly rejected celibacy more or less consciously seeks compensation. In my view, a characteristic sign of a want of maturity is the difficulty which many celibates experience in forming relationships of equality. When relationships oscillate between subjection and domination, it is likely that the objective in each case is personal security rather than the gift of life. Other forms of self-seeking, frequently to be found among those who lead a celibate life, include masturbation and homosexuality. I do not want to dwell upon the moral implications of such behaviour; but it should be seen first and foremost as indicating the inability to love and to enter into liberating relationships, creative of life.

I would like to consider more at length two types of behaviour which seem to me particularly prevalent. They might be characterized (admittedly with a touch of caricature) as respectively the feminine and masculine expression of a celibacy lived out in a less than fully mature manner. Typical of a large number of religious women is the 'mother-hen' attitude. The effect of this tendency to

⁴ Jn 10, 10.

⁵ Jn 4, 9.

possess, to protect and coddle, is to prevent the other person from growing up, from becoming himself. In the religious woman this constant attentiveness and preoccupation with tiny details corresponds perfectly to her maternal instincts, but is the other person helped by it all to become his own distinctive self? It is interesting to notice the way chaplains in certain sisters' communities are pampered, surrounded with attention, even revered. Nothing is too much for 'Father', and 'Father', of course, is surrounded by some forty 'mothers', all attentive to his every need. Overwhelmed by so much maternal care, he is hardly likely to find in the women around him the sort of challenge which might promote his own growth.

I have taken the example of the chaplain, but other instances of the same type of behaviour could be found in every area of life: community, education, social work, to mention a few. I am far from wanting to disparage this highly feminine way of being present to others; potentially, it is of incomparable value. Nevertheless, the question always needs to be asked whether in a particular case anything more is happening than the simple satisfaction of maternal instinct, or whether the effect is really to assist the other person's growth. To be sure, motivation has no black and white clarity, but this is precisely why we need to ask questions. If a relationship enables the other to become more truly himself, it is one of maturity; if not, the other is possibly being stifled, deprived of the chance to live his own freedom.

The corresponding masculine characteristic – and notice again that I am slightly over-simplifying – is activism. I believe that many priests and religious men, fundamentally fearful of personal relationships which would oblige them to grow and to call themselves in question, take refuge in *doing*; in finding in material or intellectual activity the extension of their own personality and the satisfaction of a creative need. I am sure that it would come as a surprise to many psycho-analysts to discover the real motivational sources in which innumerable buildings, churches, schools, and youth centres have their origin. It is easier – and in the last analysis more conducive to security – to build a church which will endure to posterity as Father X's monument than to help a community to grow through suffering. Perhaps one might quote in this connection the remark of an african bishop, when asked what he would do if five new missionaries were sent overnight into his diocese: 'You westerners are always talking about doing; come to Africa and you will find that here the first thing is to be'. Too often in our 'doing',

a fatherhood which lacks the means to express itself is seeking compensation. On the other hand, true fatherhood as lived in celibacy should be life-creating, and this first and foremost through what one is.

Celibacy: gift of life

Marc Oraison, in his little book *How to Love*, writes: 'In a sense, it might be said, that, psychologically speaking, celibacy can be justified as a viable human attitude only if it expresses the living commitment of a personality sufficiently fulfilled in regard to its affective growth'.⁶ Only the fully human being can embark upon the celibate life (hence the prayer quoted at the beginning of these notes).

Yet celibacy is not simply a matter of logic, its meaning is more than simply rational. Those who are called to live this life need to be sufficiently free to accept to do so without being able completely to explain their choice. The interior life is not to be equiparated with the efforts in which it finds embodiment. There is always a profound separation between the two, and the element of effort may best be seen as the symbol of what is interior. Our attempts are no more than the poor reflection of a mystery which transcends our power of expression, the mystery of a free gift of God. But only the mature are capable of accepting this mystery in their lives, because only they do not feel 'threatened' by it. Their inner security enables them to accept the unknown in their lives, and perhaps it is precisely this which makes an adult faith. For if we are capable of accepting the mystery of celibacy in our own lives, we cease to feel endangered when called upon to share the lives of those who do not live in celibacy, but have chosen another way of expressing the mystery of love which they bear in themselves. Our celibacy cannot and must not be lived only in a 'cosy' community atmosphere.

Again, it is a sign of maturity to accept that others will question a way of life which can never be explained in a completely satisfactory manner on the level of human logic.

Celibacy can be lived only in faith because, over and above psychological considerations, the centre of our life is the person of Jesus Christ. And once again, I am talking about an adult faith; for only a mature person is able to comprehend how joy and suffering come together in the paschal mystery; and that to die is to create

⁶ Oraison, Marc: *Savoir Aimer: Pour une claire information sexuelle* (Paris 1963), p 107.

life. Only a mature person can choose, like Christ, to be vulnerable. It is in meditating upon the person of Jesus Christ, the Word who was made flesh in order to be completely in communion with men, that we can *freely* accept the demands of a celibate life:

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁷

Self-revelation, openness to others, the willingness to be vulnerable, even to be betrayed, rejected or exploited by those we love: these are the prerequisites of authentic communion. It is in accepting that God's ways are not ours that we appropriate the element of death which forms an integral part of the living out of love in celibacy. But the ultimate purpose of it all is to give life, 'to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness'.⁸ Just as God has given us his Word Jesus Christ to bring about community founded upon communion with himself, so should our own celibate love be creative and liberating, so that our relationships with the men and women whom the Lord puts in our way may build up true community.

Appendix

The following questions are intended to guide you in making a personal evaluation of the maturity of your relationships. They offer in effect possible alternatives to your ways of thinking, reacting, behaving – alternatives which might point the way to a more realistic and healthy approach to life. In reading these questions you should bear in mind that no discovery you may come to make about yourself should be a cause of fear or shame.

- i) Do you fully realize that, however you behave, there will always be someone to find fault with you? Or do you waste time over the impossible task of trying to please everybody?
- ii) Do you realize that certain relationships are not worth continuing, that there are some which lead you to waste emotive energy as well as time?
- iii) Are you capable of facing up to the negative as well as the positive feelings which arise between friends?

Phil 2, 6–7.

⁸ Isai 42, 7.

- iv) Are you afraid to let yourself be known by others because you do not love yourself as you really are?
- v) Are you too afraid of failure to make the attempt to build up a friendship?
- vi) Do you demand of your friends more than, humanly speaking, they can give you?
- vii) Do you look to others for total acceptance and undivided attention?
- viii) Do you have that freedom for love which consists in being free from the compulsive need to be physically present among those whom you love?
- ix) Do your friendships help other people to become more fully human?