

CHASTITY AS VOW IN THE JESUIT LIFE-PROJECT

By JOSEF FUCHS

FOR MANY centuries, and indeed since the beginning of christianity, the praise of consecrated chastity, christian virginity, and celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God has been sung in the christian Church. This praise has often turned into a lofty mysticism of the reciprocal surrender between the christian (the 'soul') and Christ. Assuredly, a certain angelism and a good measure of suspicious hostility against corporality and sexuality have been a part of this praise; but occasionally there has also been present an appreciation of the freedom that celibacy affords for the participation in the apostolic mission in the context of the Church's total effort. Who knows all the overtones that are involved when priestly celibacy and vowed chastity of religious are extolled as a 'precious jewel' – not only by Augustine or in the middle ages, but even in our own day?

The question arises: Will a young man join the Society of Jesus today because of the value of this costly jewel – as well as for many other reasons? Hardly. When, however, one enters because of this reason, either he is an extremely mature man with a deep spirituality – which seldom happens – or else he can be suspected of having a questionable and extremely immature understanding of himself. Presumably young men will come to us with totally different motives. Surely, their willingness to enter the community also includes the willingness to accept the celibate life which its members observe. As time goes by, these men will reflect upon the effectiveness of celibate chastity, and then they must indeed willingly and completely affirm it. Not all mature jesuits, however, presently affirm celibacy as the 'unique and precious jewel' of their order's effectiveness, which is valued and 'revered' as such in a particular way. They cannot make this affirmation no matter how much they might be convinced of the meaning and value of celibacy in the life of our order.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

This introductory consideration may seem to stand in direct contrast to the fact that we have apparently let our order's life be simultaneously based on three individual vows, viewed separately, one of which is the vow of celibate chastity. Hence the question: How should we understand celibacy and chastity *as a vow* in our community so as to give the vow a place of value?

In what follows, we will first seek to ascertain the place and value of celibate chastity in our Society, understood as an apostolic religious community, but not formally as a vow. Here we shall be dealing principally with the function of celibacy for the *apostolic mission*, and the meaning of celibate chastity in the total *life-style* of the apostolic religious order. Secondly, we will direct our attention to celibate chastity as a formal vow. And here the questions arise: 1. Why a particular vow of 'chastity'? 2. What relation exists between the 'perpetuity' of the vow of chastity and life-choice for the 'Society of Jesus'? 3. In the total context of our understanding of religious life, what place should there be in the Society for the religious-mystical understanding of the vow of chastity?

CELIBATE CHASTITY IN THE APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS ORDER

1. *Celibacy in service to the apostolic mission*

First of all, we direct our attention to the function of celibate chastity for the apostolic mission of the Society of Jesus. We start from the fact that the approach to and entrance into the community is often remotely sociologically conditioned. How many elements are brought to bear when someone becomes interested in the community of the jesuits with which he has had contact, or which he has come to know to such an extent that he himself joins the community! What attracts a person is generally not an isolated detail, but the totality: that is, the relationship of the total mission to the reality comprehended in faith, the means to the fulfilment of this mission, and the christian life-style corresponding to this mission. The entrance into this community is an essential means of realizing personal faith, which will be progressively understood as the *consequence of this faith*. Finally, the decision to follow this concrete means of realizing faith must be seen as a graced vocation, in spite of all 'conditioning', external and internal.

The essential apostolic mission of the community, as the consequence of faith and in the imitation of Christ, can be fulfilled in many ways. In apostolic orders like the Society of Jesus, poverty,

celibate chastity and obedience, and other factors as well, are among the elements imprinted on the apostolic community. As a community which lives in poverty, obedience, and also in chaste celibacy, it seeks to fulfil the mission to which faith impels it. What is at stake here then is more than the individual values such as the content of the three vows; it is rather the total mission of the community and its members, who follow out a particular life-style suitable for the mission and which stands *in service to it*. Thus, celibate chastity is not conceived in isolation, as if it were independent of the whole, which is the essential element. Rather it is to be understood as a service to the whole.

It is true that the profound meaning of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom has been reflected upon in the Society of Jesus; and notably in the wake of the second Vatican Council, as embodied in the Decree on Chastity of the 31st General Congregation. Indeed, our Constitutions suppose such a reflection, even though they do not expressly state it. Ignatius himself took a vow of virginity as an expression of his conversion. The Constitutions, on the other hand, view the contents of the three vows, expressly and primarily, *in service to the apostolic mandate*.¹ The functional meaning of the vows is here richly explicited in regard to poverty and obedience, but it is only briefly expressed in regard to chastity.

2. *Celibacy as a life-style of christian freedom*

The meaning of celibate chastity in the total life-style of the apostolic community must be distinguished from the function of celibate chastity for apostolic mission; for this life-style must also be *meaningful in itself*. Indeed, like apostolic mission itself, this life-style must also be meaningful as an essential means of bringing to fulfilment faith and the following of Christ.

It is important here, too, not to view the single elements – poverty, chastity and obedience – as primary and in isolation, but rather to see the life-style as a totality which is also stamped with these individual elements. Certainly these elements do not stand in isolation; they are in harmony with the entire life-style, the meaningfulness of which the christian comprehends and makes his own through his living faith. Thus the importance of celibate chastity is not predominantly its meaning in isolation – though this certainly cannot

¹ *Constitutions*, Part VI, ch 1. Cf the english translation (ed. G. L. Ganss, Institute of Jesuit sources, St Louis, 1970), pp 245ff.

be excluded – but rather its meaning for the entire life-style.

The three (or more) vows not only signify these three elements of a life-style in isolation from one another, but also the life-style in its totality. This corresponds to the fact that life in christian religious orders has not always been understood from the viewpoint of the trinity of poverty-chastity-obedience. Thus for the benedictines, the total life-style was viewed under the single idea of *obedience*, an idea which simultaneously means the *conversio morum* (change of conduct of life) and the *stabilitas in congregatione* (stability in community). This includes poverty and chastity, and much more besides. With a different accentuation, today the fundamental character of a life-style of a religious order is seen to be nuanced differently, preferably by poverty. Naturally, the virtue of poverty is understood to involve more than the formal vow of poverty. It signifies an entirely conscious and radical acceptance of human limitation and mortality. It is against this that the egotist is in conflict; but the christian, living with faith and hope as his foundation, is able to accept it. It is this poverty which renounces family and marriage in the freedom grounded in faith and hope. Similarly, *virginity* can signify the totality; a virginity which means that we are definitively 'married' to nothing, unconditionally bound to nothing, and absolutely dependent upon nothing. Virginity, thus understood, includes poverty, obedience, and many other things. It characterizes the totality of a life-style.

The three vows of religious orders – and thus of celibacy – do not exclusively signify their own content; they signify even more radically the means of expressing an entire life-style. This is seen in the fact that the professed body of the Society of Jesus (and the Society is not alone in this) adds an additional fourth vow and five other vows to the three. We are accustomed to understanding the three religious vows as corresponding to what has usually been called, since the twelfth century, the three evangelical counsels. However, these three vows (in their specialized form) are not presented in the gospel as a counsel. Rather the gospel recognizes various counsels which are largely understood as situationally conditioned or dependent on the granting of charisms. Thus the Second Vatican Council speaks of the 'so-called evangelical counsels',² and also of the 'various counsels'.³

² *Lumen Gentium*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 42, 43.

Chaste celibacy in religious orders – like the other religious vows – therefore signifies, in its most profound sense, a total view of life, and therefore a life-style, rather than a value sought in itself and glorified in isolation. It is understood, along with many other elements, as *a means* to live and express christian freedom. Ultimately it is a question of an authentic expression of that freedom, made possible through faith and grace, which maintains a (relative) independence from earthly goods and values. This is a freedom which opposes the temptation of mankind to resist the limitations and frailty of human reality through an unconditional, and hence ‘justified *or* unjustified’, assurance of earthly goods, by simply accepting this reality. On the grounds of this acceptance, then, one is not only able to live just as well rich or poor, married or celibate, but also to be able to ‘possess without possessing’, and so on. This radical means of living christian freedom does not assert itself absolutely; on the contrary, it is itself still somehow free. It is not christian freedom itself; it is simply one way, among others, of living it. It should not then boast about itself. It can, perhaps, be understood as the anticipation of the eschatological freedom which cannot yet be total (in this world we can live only in renunciation). Moreover, this anticipation can exist only in an analogous way. (In the *eschaton* there will be no marrying, but also no celibacy; one can speak meaningfully of voluntary celibacy only in so far as marriage exists.) If this means of realizing christian freedom does not assert itself absolutely, it will not flee with anxiety or disrespect from the value it renounces. It will not totally renounce the value which was given up, to the degree that this value is able to deepen the selected life-style of christian freedom and to strengthen apostolic mission. On the other hand, it does not consider as second-class christians those who dedicate themselves in a correct way, with thanksgiving and in christian freedom, to the earthly values and goods which are entrusted to us by creation and redemption. Thus these christians can have, because of this freedom, the goods of life, as well as wife and family; and at the same time, when necessary, they can renounce them, and thereby are able to accept human limitations and instability. The realization of christian freedom in a life-style of renunciation co-exists, then, not only with the fear that christians who live their freedom by means of possessing may have lost their christian freedom, but also with the fear that this freedom might be lost in the characteristic life-style of this freedom.

CELIBATE CHASTITY AS VOW

a). *Celibacy as a particular vow*

We will now turn our attention to celibate chastity as a formal vow. As we have already noticed, celibate chastity was not always a particular vow for religious orders. The New Testament treats celibate chastity not as a vow, but rather as a charism, by which a christian in his faith is so moved by the reality of the Kingdom of God that, in giving his life for this reality, marriage does not even come into question. It is from this reality, and not because of a vow, that his life-style is decided. If we understand it in this way, celibate chastity should be considered not so much as a particular vow but rather as an element within the totality of religious life; not so much as a high moral ideal to which a person generously strives to aspire, but rather as a graced and gifted way of christian freedom: one which a person undertakes with gratitude and magnanimity rather than with many words, and attempts to *live*, in the hope of being able to remain faithful because of the constant grace of the calling: conscious always that even this attempt can be diminished through mediocrity and failure.

Perhaps such an understanding of chaste celibacy would have helped prevent the vow of chastity and the living of a life of celibacy from being put before people who lacked the maturity and were not in the right existential situation to realize this good, no matter how high their motivation or the sublimity of the moral goal. It is very feasible that where the vow was presented in this way, it hindered, made a chimera of, a truly personal decision for celibate chastity in religious life. In other words, the young person, in his enthusiasm, could easily subscribe to an ideal that was not existentially comprehended – about which he was humanly blind.

In speaking thus, we do not wish to exclude the particular religious vow of celibate chastity, but rather to give it the meaning and place due to it in reality.

Celibate chastity, as a vow, does have its meaning. In the last ten years much has been said concerning the witness-value of vows among the people of God. This witness-value actually belongs to a vow, when it is truly lived, in so far as it is a vow *in an institution* of the Church. What is signified is a visible witness that earthly goods and values are not ours to possess in an unconditioned manner: but on the contrary, only in a spirit of freedom. For others, however, this witness-value might not be sufficient as the meaning and moti-

vation of the vow of the individual and the community. But does not the consecrated community as a whole, and, correspondingly, the individual as a member of the community, need concrete signs to testify to the meaning of their life-style? Vows like that of celibate chastity can be such a sign and an articulation of the way of life that is chosen. At the same time, there is, in this view, an expression of and a stimulus to a style of life, conformable to the order, which is a means of realizing christian freedom. In its particularity, this vow should not be over-valued, nor should it be seen apart from its real connection with the totality of the life-style and its meaning.

b). *The vow of celibacy as a life-choice*

In the Society of Jesus, the vows, including that of celibate chastity, are taken as a life-decision, definitively and perpetually. It is here that we need to examine just how far it is true that taking these vows signifies the final definition, the rounded-off foundation of a life-style chosen in faith; even though this life-style, in its entirety, is not promised in a vow. Perhaps it would be better not to underline so heavily single vows as 'perpetual', but rather to put more emphasis on a style of life which exhibits a life-choice; for a life-style as a life-choice signifies absolute duration, definitive decision. This is not to deny that our life is realized only step by step, until we finally discover where we have arrived after many steps of self-realization. None the less, such an 'atomistic' conception of human life, and this includes the christian life of faith, is insufficient because less than 'human'. Man tries in all of his steps to catch hold of and to realize the totality of his life, even if its expression is limited, and thus somehow to anticipate the entire future. This corresponds to the reality of the mature man, in that such a man, out of the many diverse possibilities of life-styles, sooner or later acknowledges a certain life-style as his own, and, with it, accepts for ever a freely-chosen meaning for his life. Such a choice of life is likewise intended in the definitive joining of a religious community, even more than through the taking of the particular vow of celibate chastity. Such a life-decision contains within itself the prospect that future and not fully foreseeable events and happenings of life be always surveyed and specified by this basic decision. The consequence is that, despite the impossibility of total foresight, these future events must be lived and understood in the sense of one's own life-choice. To this extent, they are never something 'completely' new; at the same time, they make actual the life-style, in the on-going process of the here and

now. If, then, the definitive decision for a life-style has been made maturely, it can never be affected by any unexpected event, in such a way that any intervening new decision, even a decision to leave the religious community, could ever be taken except in the light of the original decision.

Now celibate chastity belongs to the life-style of our religious community; this determines the tenor of the express vow. In so far as this is seen in the entirety of life-style and life-choice, and is understood as an articulate expression of the same, then the eventual abandonment of the life-style of the religious community will bring into question the persisting significance of the vow. Similarly, the abolition of the vow of celibate chastity would lead to the abandonment of the life-style of the religious community. We know that doubts have been expressed with regard to the possibility of celibate chastity as an enduring vow, and therefore implicitly of an enduring intention to remain in a religious community for life. Notice that the primary concern here is the adoption of the particular life-style of a community in which celibate chastity certainly is included: and in our legislation, in the form of a vow. Doubtless, celibate chastity as a lasting vow has its particular difficulties. In addition, the mature, informed and proven young man of twenty-five years cannot fully foresee or experience beforehand what celibate chastity will demand of him at a later age, or in the possible exterior or interior events of his life. This is not, however, to affirm in principle that a mature person cannot accept the way of life of celibate chastity in faith and hope: not in order to see what the outcome will be, but rather in the charismatic hope, and fortified with the grace corresponding to this hope, that he will see, cope with, and live through future events, which are not entirely foreseeable in their particularity. There will also be psychic changes in the context of the chosen and vowed life-style of celibate chastity; and all these are related to the total way of life of the religious society. This, of course, does not exclude the possibility that, in particular individual cases, the keeping of the vow, even if one's choice was made with mature prudence and consideration, will seem no longer to have sense, whether this is one's own fault or not.

In this decision, it must be insisted above all that, in the adoption of a new life-style, the vocation of each christian life, that is, christian freedom in face of all earthly reality, is fulfilled in a peculiarly radical way: now, however, in thankful possession as one not possessing, in place of the previous non-possession. This common

freedom of all christians was indeed lived in the life-style of the religious community and of celibate chastity, in the peculiarly radical way of renunciation.

c). *The religious-mystical understanding of the vow of celibacy*

If we are to have a total view of religious community and its life-style, we certainly need truly to appreciate the proper place of the vow of chastity in religious life as a whole. This involves, in turn, a deep religious and mystical understanding of the celibate chastity accepted in our lives in terms of a vow, no matter how difficult it may be to express and interpret this understanding theologically. Certainly, this mystical view plays an extremely important role in our Society, in which the *familiaritas cum Deo* (familiarity with God) is so strongly accented. It can doubtless secure the continuance of celibate chastity and can effect a deepening understanding and appreciation of our entire life-style. It has the capacity, moreover, to draw from faith powerful energies for one's mission in life. It must be emphasized, however, that all this supposes that the vow of chastity is not considered in isolation; otherwise it would result in a falsification of the life-style, as a whole.

To conclude, it should be perfectly clear that the preceding exposition is not directed against a deep religious and mystical understanding of celibate chastity or the right theological interpretation of this understanding. But we do not defend erroneous presentations of it, nor do we believe that this kind of understanding should be indiscriminately proposed to all jesuits, especially when dealing with the youngest among them. Our reflections, moreover, are not against the vow as such, provided that the examination of celibate chastity as vow does not in any way misrepresent the totality of our vocation by creating a false emphasis. Rather, the accent is much more on the harmonious and meaningful position of the vow in the totality of the life-project of our jesuit vocation. In our discussions on celibate chastity, then, we ought to speak less of the sense, content and meaning of the vow in the isolated sense, and much more of jesuit vocation, in its entirety, to a *mission and service*: one which originates in a living christian faith, which expresses itself in a living community with a *life-style* based on faith, to which chaste celibacy naturally belongs. The formula, 'joining this community and acceptance into it', is doubtless a richer and more complete statement than the formula, 'admission to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience'.