

WHO CHOOSES CELIBACY – AND WHY?

By MARY ANNE COATE

I WAS ASKED, IN WRITING this article, to draw upon my background in clinical psychology and psychotherapy. I am therefore assuming that it is something specifically psychological that is being looked for. Yet there immediately sounded for me a note of caution and warning and as I browsed in some of the background literature prior to beginning writing I found this warning sounded loud and clear in words that I do not think I can improve upon so I would like to quote them here. I was looking anew at *Solitary refinement* by Sister Madeleine OSA. She is writing specifically of the religious life but her words can well apply to the theme of celibacy in any context.

Motivations in general and religious motivations in particular, are rarely simple and clear; they are more often complex and tangled. We tend to expose, even to ourselves, only those motives that are rational or socially acceptable . . . But in fact, simply because there are inadequate, non-rational factors that strongly influence our choices, it does not follow that all our acceptable, reasonable self-explanations are ‘nothing but’ the subtle masks of a devious subconscious. Almost all our upright and honourable choices have a shadowy background in which lurk the traces of infantilism and emotional distortion. It is possible that many a doctor or social worker has undertaken his profession *both* through a genuine desire to alleviate distress, *and* an unacknowledged need to be needed or to appease some form of sub-rational guilt . . .

Religious are such an easy prey for superficial psychologising. This may be one reason why they seem to prefer the extreme objectivity of explanations such as ‘I have been called by God’, for it shifts the whole initiative of their choice from the confused sphere of subjectivity, where it is difficult to know whether conscious, adequate motives disguise or simply co-exist with unconscious compulsions, fears and drives. In fact, of course, there may be elements such as the desire for spiritual or emotional security, fear of marriage, a compulsive need for order and discipline, childish other-worldliness, among their motives. The individual must be helped to become aware of these and to assess whether they are primary or secondary determinations. For they may be secondary and in no way disprove the existence or authenticity of a desire to spend oneself for others in love and service, or a deep-seated conviction that

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one's human, spiritual growth could best be served within a religious community.¹

This was written in 1972 – not very long after Vatican II – and therefore predates some of the questioning and agonizing that has emerged not only in relation to celibacy but also over other issues of the religious life and priesthood. But I have quoted the passage at length because I think it encapsulates many of the salient points of today's debate.

The dangers of 'psychologizing'

There are dangers in making psychological pronouncements, which is why warning bells sounded. It seems to me that the main one is that of claiming for them a false objectivity and absoluteness. We are dealing with non-concrete issues and areas of ourselves that we cannot objectively observe, and it seems important therefore that our judgements be tentative and not permitted to generalize into rules or even myths. For example, it is not uncommon to hear that people choose celibacy because they are afraid of marriage or because of unhappy love affairs. Some people may, but it seems to me to be going beyond the evidence to claim that it is always or even often like that. Furthermore, as Sister Madeleine points out, there is a further danger of thinking that psychological truth and insight is the only level of truth there is. We may have opted for celibacy for not entirely healthy psychological reasons, but this does not necessarily invalidate the choice on another level. How and when it may mean that the choice does not work out is something I want to take up in more detail later.

The danger of 'psychologizing' is, however, but one side of the coin. The other is the danger of being defensive, claiming that the spiritual nature of vocation overrides all other levels of truth and becoming blind to emotional and psychological difficulties or even 'spiritualizing' them as I think may sometimes have happened when, for example, depression has been confused with and relabelled as 'the dark night of the soul'. Such defensiveness has often been the order of the day in relation to celibacy, and mistaken choices and emotional suffering have been overlooked to the detriment of people's functioning and emotional health.

The nature of choice

I found myself slightly puzzled by my title – 'Who chooses celibacy?' – and my first thought was 'this is wrong somehow: people do not *choose* celibacy; they are *called* to it'. Or, more precisely, 'they are called to a form of the celibate life', for celibacy does not really exist as an abstract.

It is a statement about *relationship*, for with the possible exception of the solitary, the celibate person lives in the world of people and relationships, albeit in a particular way. I then realized that I had been thinking theologically, not psychologically; I had been taking the 'objective' line of which Sr Madeleine speaks and so ducking the issue. Yet thinking psychologically I came up against the same question. 'Does anybody actually *choose* celibacy – in the sense of making a completely rational and thought-out decision – particularly at the time of their original call?'

For I am committed to the belief that our conscious, rational self is but the tip of the iceberg which is our total being. A large part of our being is not conscious to us, though it can become more so as we grow in self-awareness. Furthermore, in that unconscious part is also the 'memory' of our early history and relationships, some of which may be partially available to us through actual memory, but much more may be hidden yet exercising a strong determining force on our lives. It is impossible, therefore, for any 'choice' of ours to be completely free, though all psychological work on ourselves aims to help our choices become progressively more free.

This is true of all major life choices, not only those involving celibacy. We could as easily ask 'Who chooses marriage – to whom – and why?' But the issue in relation to celibacy can perhaps be put like this. *It does not seem to be the natural choice*, for it involves the decision not to express one of our strongest drives, sexuality, that must rank with the needs for food, attachment and security as being near fundamental to our existence. I think it is important not to see sexuality as *the drive par excellence*; early psychoanalytical theory which focused almost exclusively upon it is, I think, less helpful than later developments which place it in the more total context of our need for relationship – and indeed may have given rise to 'superficial psychologizing'. Nevertheless, sexuality is fundamental; therefore the 'choice' not to give it expression requires explanation, if not exactly justification.

This is perhaps clearer now than it has been at any other time. Earlier theological thought that gave to celibacy a cherished and superior place has been questioned: for example that which claimed for celibates a supreme availability to and empathy with others. The celibate life is now not the only alternative to marriage. In the Roman Catholic Church something of the 'aura' of the priesthood and the religious life has disappeared; in the Anglican Church the religious life never really enjoyed that privileged position so issues inherent in the choice of the celibate life were always pertinent. Questions are increasingly being asked about celibacy as an imposed part of a response to vocation to the

Roman Catholic priesthood, or – for those of a homosexual orientation – to ministry in most denominations.

The determinants of choice

It seems to me that when we come to make a choice we are operating at the intersection point of various pulls upon us. Some of these are 'external' to our being, others are more 'internal'. There is the total situation or environment in which we live; for choices relating to celibacy this will include the mores of the time and place – whether the Church and world of our time accords to celibacy an honoured or denigrated place, though of course our reaction to this may be to go along with the current ethos or to need to rebel against it! There is the pull of the religious tradition upon us, *and* the current interpretation or questioning of that tradition. There is the pull on us of our own experience of that tradition, through religious teaching, life in the community of faith, the life of prayer or the experience of religious conversion. And finally there is the pull on us of our human emotional past and present – our present circumstances and life situation and our family history and early experience. These 'pulls' on us are not, however, likely to be equal in strength, and indeed it may seem artificial to divide them up in this sort of way. But I do so because I have a sense that according to our own discipline we tend to perceive them as differentially important. A sociologist might perhaps focus on the total environment in which we live; a theologian may emphasize the content and strength of the religious tradition, whilst a psychologist may feel that an individual's emotional history is the strongest determinant of choice. I think it is important to acknowledge this because it may help us to admit the possibility of bias in our judgements and so help us to allow them to be tentative and open to challenge and modification.

As a psychologist from the psychodynamic tradition I am committed to the belief that a very strong determinant of choice is an individual person's history, both that of which he or she is conscious, and, even more strongly, that part of experience that is more or less hidden and unknown. Furthermore, it is a person's unique history and experience that is determinative, not vague generalizations about people with this or that sort of background. People may have what appear to be similar backgrounds and history, but they never are identical. No two children in the same family have the same experience of that family and the differences in their experience may lead them to later life choices. Perhaps, for example, eldest children of large families may be more likely than others to opt for lives and professions that require them to be

responsible for and take care of others? It seems plausible, but I generalize, which I have already suggested we do at our peril . . .

However, on one level we *are* required to generalize or we would find it hard to learn from experience. So I think this article does require me to attempt to make some generalizations, provided it is realized that there may be elements in any *individual's* personality and experience that will confound all the generalizations. That seven out of ten people with similar backgrounds might opt for a life of celibacy does not mean that the other three will or that the seven who do are all doing so for identical reasons. So, having put out all the caveats and words of caution . . .

Who may choose celibacy – and why?

A distinction needs to be made between *celibacy* and *virginity*. Celibacy is a much wider term than virginity in that people can choose the celibate life from all levels of sexual arousal and experience or none. The choice may be made in virginity, it may be made after heterosexual or homosexual experience, it may be made after marriage, parenthood or divorce. I will now venture a generalization and suggest that it is made when *the 'inner world' of a person demands it*.

What is this *inner world* of ours? In one sense it has no real existence in that if we cut ourselves open we would not find a new and tangible world inside us! But as we grow and develop from early infancy onwards we accumulate experiences – mostly of people and relationships, starting with the most primitive relationship with our mothers. Many of the experiences pass from our conscious memory but in some unfathomable way they live on and colour the way we come to look at the real outside world of people and ideas. Some of these experiences are painful and almost unbearable to us, like being left hungry and uncomfortable in a pram, or being sexually abused, so we come to develop what psychological thought has called defences² against their obtrusion into consciousness. All of us need defences because we could not bear to be exposed to all our emotional experience all the time, but the nature and strength of our defences vary. The lasting work on psychological defences was done by Anna Freud,³ followed by Melanie Klein;⁴ the purpose of a defence is to prevent us feeling emotional pain and anxiety beyond that which our being can tolerate.

I am going to take the bull by the horns and suggest that *the profession of celibacy is likely to be defensive*, but in saying this I do not mean to be pejorative or denigrating of the celibate life. For I have already indicated that we all need defences in order to function at the optimal level – *for us*. If we now look at the possible anxieties likely to be aroused in the area of

sexuality and close relationships we can begin to hypothesize *how* the profession of celibacy can come to function as a defence against pain associated with these areas. Let us consider the following possible 'scenarios'.

Suppose we have an inner world peopled with memories of angry parent figures – quarrelling and fighting with each other and causing threatening anxiety to our small being; we may grow up with a sense that marriage, parenthood and childhood are not 'good', comfortable states of being. In fact I was struck when reading Geoffrey Moorhouse's examination of the religious life *Against all reason*,⁵ in which he gives many firsthand accounts by monks and nuns of their discovery of their vocation, by how many of these accounts featured a childhood in which parents were unhappy and quarrelling, *and* the fact that some of the respondents gave this quite specifically as a determining factor in their vocation. Such experiences tend to belong to the period of childhood that we *can* consciously remember, but if our even earlier infancy was marred by deprivation, or excessive frustration and anxiety through our infant needs not being met or met soon enough, then we may develop a sense that being dependent on anyone else is not a 'good' thing to be. I put the words 'good' – or 'bad' – in quotes because they are being used in a more primitive sense than usual; there is in reality no moral tone attached to them, though later we may ascribe values and value judgements to the experiences that gave rise to the sensations. If we experienced any of these childhood states to excess then the profession of celibacy may well serve to defend us – or so we think – against a repetition of that sort of pain in our later life.

Another possible scenario is that somehow, and imperceptibly, we come to believe that our love is greedy, dangerous or guilty. This could come about through our being unable to resolve the inevitable period of attraction to the parent of the opposite sex in which the strong yet fruitless attraction may engender all sorts of fearful feelings of guilt for our desire; this may also affect negatively our ability to make a potentially maturity-producing identification with the parent of the same sex. Love and sex can also become dangerous through castigation and censure of childhood explorations of the body or sensuality. Or a mother–infant relationship characterized by deprivation can somehow lead us to 'believe' that all expression of need and desire is 'bad'. The profession of celibacy in later life can then come to function as a defence against us feeling the pain and guilt of *wanting and desire*; it can help to keep all this repressed and unconscious.

Scenarios such as these rely for their credibility on psychological theory; they are not easily amenable to 'proof'. Less obscurely, observ-

able traumatic events in later childhood or adulthood, such as sexual abuse or the breakdown of a close relationship, may leave an individual with a fear of this whole dimension and a need to avoid it. Sexual abuse in childhood may indeed be primary in inducing this sort of psychological reaction, but when it sets in after the breakdown of a relationship in adulthood, then it is perhaps more likely to be already a *repetition* of some earlier but more hidden failure in relationship.

The foregoing paragraphs may help to illumine the process of a choice for celibacy perhaps particularly in relation to vocations undertaken in a state of virginity; the risk of an intimate sexual relationship cannot be taken. But we also see people opting for the celibate life after a period of promiscuity – either heterosexual or homosexual. Here the motivation cannot be primary fear or avoidance of sexual arousal or the need to keep that area denied or repressed. It seems more likely that another psychological defence, known as *splitting*, has been called into play. Sexuality is ‘split’ into its extremes – promiscuity or complete abstinence – as if a person has no middle way of dealing with it and ‘flips’ from one to the other.

It is also possible for the whole sexual area to be dehumanized and ‘spiritualized’ and then projected or displaced onto relationship with God. Some devotion to the Father, Christ or the Virgin Mary can be of this nature. But as we begin to touch on this area we approach the heart of the issue. The biblical record in the Song of Songs and much mystical writing celebrate an erotic element in our relationship with God. Some of the saints, such as Francis and Clare, sacrificed their human love in order to let their relationship with God develop in its fullness. When is the profession of celibacy an unhelpful form of defence against the anxieties of relationship, a displacement of the whole sexual dimension, or perhaps even a ‘punishment’ for perceived excess desire? And when and how can it become the expression of an alternative flowering of desire and self-giving?

Sister Madeleine talks of emotional difficulties being primary or secondary factors in vocation, implying that when they are primary vocation may founder. I find this distinction unhelpful partly because it is very difficult, psychologically, to sort out what is primary and what is secondary, and also because I think it is possible for an emotional difficulty to be largely determinative of a vocation to celibacy, and for the life to work out ‘well enough’ and the person to function more fruitfully than if they had not espoused this vocation. For a *perfect* vocation or *perfect* human development is impossible. To illustrate my point let me quote from one of Geoffrey Moorhouse’s vignettes – of a forty-year-old religious sister professed for twelve years:

I have had no experience of human love in terms of the man–woman relationship; in fact I grew up terrified of men and frightened of marriage, though I did think it would be rather nice to have a home and family of my own. This attitude was the result of a strained relationship between my parents; my father, having been a spoilt posthumous child, was inconsiderate and demanding; my mother thought the way to cure him was to deny him and so there were rows. Secondly my mother was a cold sort of person; she made little show of affection and so, being an affectionate person at heart, I became ashamed of it. Thirdly I was indecently assaulted by an uncle at thirteen years – hence the fear of men and the setting up a great tension because a) I had no one to tell about it and b) the incident itself was pleasing and I was not able to reconcile this with the knowledge that it was wrong. However, when I started nursing I made some good friends among the nurses but none among the medical students, from whose advances I shied like a frightened cat. In particular I made friends with the family of one nurse and this home became a second home to me and showed me what affectionate family life was like, and community life has just continued that.⁶

We are not given the end of this woman's story, but it is clear that some part of her inner world allowed her to accept into herself an experience of a 'better' family that could be containing and healing. But there are other instances where this does not happen and where the original difficulty is only reinforced. What makes the difference?

I suggest that it is the *degree of awareness or unconsciousness* that makes the difference. This woman seemed very aware of what had gone into her vocation to community; she was not denying or repressing her experience. It was as if, knowing the worst about herself and family life, she could re-evaluate them and make something different of another opportunity. Whereas, without a lot of psychotherapy – and perhaps even with it – she might never have resolved her childhood experience enough to make a go of the close intimate relationship of marriage. Furthermore, her memories were accessible to her because they seemed to arise from experience at the age of understanding. The earlier difficulties are experienced the more obscure are the psychological mechanisms involved and so the greater the likely degree of unconsciousness.

This has implications for the development and permanence of vocations to celibacy. In general terms the more we are aware of what is going into our choice the more stable and fruitful that choice is likely to be. Deeply unconscious material may not apparently cause us as much disturbance or distress as that which is more accessible to consciousness,

but if it stays unconscious it may inhibit and stunt both human and spiritual development. On the other hand, if what has been deeply unconscious erupts into consciousness – perhaps through a sudden and overwhelming sexual attraction and arousal – and to the degree that this is at variance with the previous conscious awareness of the person, the more likely there is at that point to be a crisis of vocation. Then there is need for another choice, perhaps a more informed one, and this time it may go either way. The inner world demands again; the result may be an acceptance of the loss and sacrifice involved in celibacy with a truer awareness of just what this means emotionally. Acceptance of the loss and pain makes possible the mature defence of sublimation – namely the discovery of alternatives to, not substitutes for, sexual fulfilment. Or the inner need for intimate relationship and expression of sexuality may become such that denying it results in stunted growth or a suffering that the person's emotional being cannot easily bear. This is not to remove the responsibility of choice or to claim a spurious complete freedom for this second choice, but rather to ask that this choice be allowed to be made.

Much of this article, particularly my hypothesized psychological scenarios, must be tentative; I cannot prove them and I have inevitably oversimplified things for it is not possible to know, much less give an exhaustive account of the minute depths of the human psyche. I offer it therefore as *a* contribution to an exploration which I think must always retain an element of mystery.

NOTES

¹ Sister Madeleine OSA, *Solitary refinement* (London: SCM, 1972), pp 14–15.

² For a helpful introductory exposition of psychological defence mechanisms see: D. Brown and J. Pedder, *Introduction to psychotherapy* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1979), pp 25–33.

³ A. Freud, *The ego and the mechanisms of defence* (ET London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1937).

⁴ See Juliet Mitchell (ed), *The selected Melanie Klein* (London: Penguin, 1986).

⁵ G. Moorhouse, *Against all reason* (London: Penguin, 1972), ch 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 211.