

LIVING WITH COMPULSORY CELIBACY

By JAMES O'KEEFE

I WAS AFRAID TO WRITE this article alone, so I invited half a dozen friends, who are also diocesan priests, to explore the whole subject with me. The discussions were fascinating. I suspect that we all thought they would be stilted and defensive. In fact we all agreed that the whole experience had been immensely fruitful and encouraging. Perhaps that is the answer: instead of people writing about celibacy and reading about it, it may be better to invite a group together and really risk the conversation. It may have been that the soup and sandwiches on a couple of Sunday evenings provided the key to the whole thing.

We discussed a wide range of subjects, from loneliness to intimacy, sacrifice to frustration, sexuality to colleagues who had left the priesthood because of the demand for celibacy. But we seemed to move towards three key words – wholeness, vulnerability and apostolic value.

Wholeness

Shortly after I was ordained in 1972 I found myself producing radio programmes for Radio Tees, a new independent local radio station in Stockton. It was a very exciting time. At the age of twenty-five I was the oldest presenter on the station. Part of the job was to present a phone-in programme on a Sunday evening, when people could ring up about anything at all, though their calls were supposed to be associated with 'religion' in some way. At times it was a bit of a free for all, and one caller managed to put into words what many others were thinking when he asked: 'I know you are a Catholic priest, but have you ever had sex with a girl in the back of your mini?'

I seem to remember saying that I was indeed a priest, and I did drive a mini, but that I had never had sex with anyone in my life. The caller followed this up with a further question: 'Don't you think you're a bit odd then?' I then said something about knowing a fair number of people who talked about having a very active sex life, but there was little evidence that they were any less odd than I was.

There is a huge myth around that to be normal, healthy and happy everyone must be sexually active. It may be that Freud should bear some responsibility for this, since he linked sex with sanity – or at least with the

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absence of neurosis. I would like to suggest that there are two major problems with this generally held presumption.

One problem is the narrowing of the word sexuality to genital sex, as though this one area of human activity is the solution to all problems. It seems to me that there is much more reflection today on the nature of sexuality. It is often described as having three interrelated facets:

Primary sexuality is the whole experience of being embodied. After all, the first statement made about any of us is a sexual statement – ‘it’s a boy’ or ‘it’s a girl’. We are born in a body and live in one. We are beginning to listen to our bodies a little more carefully, we are becoming more conscious of the implications of being a temple of the Spirit. As one spiritual director I know keeps saying: ‘It is only for decency’s sake that the bishop anoints the hands of a priest, he should really anoint his whole body!’

Genital sexuality is as much about the stirrings and longings we have as it is about genital behaviour. Unfortunately, the word is usually seen as referring to sexual activity rather than the complex of fantasies, feelings and longings that reside in everyone.

Affective sexuality is the huge area of emotion, feelings and moods which move us towards another person – that which enables us to express tenderness, gentleness, warmth, compassion and openness to touch.

Sexuality is all of this, and not one element within it.

The second problem is precisely this presumption that to be ‘normal’ everyone must be sexually active. The group of us talked at length about this – the presumption that to be ‘whole’ implies being sexually active. We unpacked the word a little and tried to identify some of the constituent elements in the idea of ‘wholeness’. We have absolutely no doubt that people who are blind or deaf or those who live with some kind of disability can be whole people. Genital sexual fulfilment need not be an essential ingredient in wholeness. Wholeness, we decided, is more to do with not being fragmented people, not being dissipated. It is more to do with maturity and harmony within one’s personality. This in turn led us to wonder how we can become ‘whole’ people. None of us felt that we had experienced any helpful guidance on any of this during our time of formation in seminary. This is not really very surprising, given that we had all been ordained before the mid 70s, many of us had spent a considerable amount of time in junior seminaries (four of us from the age of eleven), and men were pretty useless at discussing things like feelings and emotions anyway.

I shared with the group my own experience of discovering some of the pain of celibacy when, five years after ordination, I found myself in love

for the first time. The woman I loved was a religious sister, and the experience was transformative. I had so much to learn about trust, love, language and myself. We were both committed to celibacy, and needed to learn what was appropriate behaviour and expression for celibate people. I would have to say that this experience of being in love enabled me to become a more 'whole' person – facing fears, anxieties and inadequacy, and allowing someone close enough to help heal them. It is not necessarily celibacy that disables us from becoming whole people, it is more likely our fear about taking the risk to love.

It is easy to say that celibacy frees us to love, but it is not possible to love in general, without some experience of love in particular. If we do not take the risk and love, then we may well be condemned to a life without love – which is not the Christian life.

My own experience of being in love with Margaret was relatively short-lived. She died within two years of my meeting her. This was my first personal experience of bereavement, and I did not realize how much I had loved Margaret until she died. Her death led me to wonder about a whole range of things. I came to a conclusion a few months after her death that death, prayer, celibacy and poverty were just different words for the same thing.

It is self-evident that when someone dies, we are not able to rely on them in the same way. We suffer terrible loss and it can take us months if not years to let the person go and to continue growing ourselves. Death proves that we cannot rely for ever on anyone. Celibacy is a way of saying that we do not rely totally on another person for our security, our well-being, our fulfilment. Prayer is a commitment to searching for God, allowing God into our lives to direct and guide – it is a way of handing over our direction to someone else. Poverty is a way of recognizing that we cannot find fulfilment in possessions, in material belongings. All of these words indicate a pointing towards something beyond us to offer ultimate security. I believe that all of these words challenge us to look for God in our lives, and the lives of one another.

The demand that we live a celibate life, then, can be a way into exploring what we mean by wholeness, love, intimacy and the way God is the ultimate provider of what is needed. It is not that we have drifted away from the heading of *wholeness* – it is more that we have come to the point where it is fully realized.

Vulnerability

No matter how much two people love each other, they will never fully know each other. There is always more, there is always a greater depth.

There is a point in every one of us that is unknowable by another person. It is almost as though there is a 'celibate' moment within each of us, a moment which cannot be touched by another.

Yet God is there. We believe that God is present in the very core of our being, sustaining us, nurturing us. Most of us, however, need to have this presence of God enfleshed in some way so that it is 'real'. We are all rather like the three-year-old who cried in bed because she was afraid of the dark. Her mother tried to comfort her by saying that she did not need to worry because God would look after her all the time. The three-year-old, however, was not satisfied with this, she wanted someone in the room with her with skin on.

Many of us living with celibacy (even the title makes it sound like a virus) would very much like 'someone with skin on' as lover, companion or permanent friend. The need seems to change depending on our age or stage of development. It may be that the felt need earlier on is for a sexual partner, and later for a companion with whom to share the age of wisdom. It may be simply for someone to help cope with the hole of loneliness.

Whatever it is we feel we need, celibacy is an invitation into vulnerability. We cannot say to anyone else: 'You are the ultimate person in my life, I will always be here for you alone' – and no one can say that to us. There is within everyone the yearning for unity, for oneness, for completeness – and we are not able to explore the fulfilment of this yearning with one person. So we are vulnerable, and most of us are not so good at being honest about this vulnerability. We can avoid the pain by living bachelor-like lives – being single and unattached, but avoiding the real pain. We can hide behind status and power, live lives of real physical comfort and variety, escape into substance abuse of one kind or another – all rather than search out the path to genuine solitude and integrity. I think it is in his novel *Lazarus* that Morris West says that if you deprive a man of one satisfaction you sharpen his appetite for others – and power has a very spicy taste in the mouth!

This vulnerability need not make one weak. Hopefully it will make one strong. We need to appreciate that we may have to mourn the loss of ultimate union with another, and this mourning will leave us fragile.

I have experienced a profound mourning within the last twelve months. Both my parents died within two weeks of each other last July. My sister and I spent days and nights sitting with them as they gradually became weaker and finally died. One of the remarkable things that happened was that their fragility, faith, utter dependency freed us to say things, be open to one another, and other people, in a more profound

way. We saw how those who are dying can build community much more effectively than those who are living! It is indeed sad, for example, that so many of us have to wait until people are dying before we tell them we love them. One challenge of celibacy can help us become less defensive and self-protective. It may encourage us to risk a freedom of the heart.

If we live with this fragility and do not try to escape from it, then we have a great deal to offer others. We have a vital opportunity to show that it is possible to live in the modern world and not be obsessed with it. Our fragility can make us non-threatening to people. It can witness to the fact that it is possible to relate to others without dominating them, without being possessive, without being exclusive.

There is nothing wrong with being vulnerable. It may be that the witness of the diocesan priest to celibacy will make a significant contribution to the whole debate about being men in the last few years of this millennium. We are called to speak out about and share our honest convictions and feelings and live with the consequences. If we can ponder the celibate state honestly and courageously, then we can make a genuine contribution to all the debates about power, male/female collaboration, sexuality and personal development, as well as witness to a God who is transcendent as well as intimate with all of us. We may be able to witness to a God who is present in the unconnectedness, chasm, fractions within us, among us and between us. Perhaps the witness to celibacy is the witness to the presence of God in what we experience as distance, loneliness, longing and the need for unity.

Apostolic action

One way in which some people try to make sense of celibacy is to say that celibate people are freer and more available to become involved with others. The fundamental problem with this functional approach is that a person who is not free or becomes less available, through illness for example, still has to make sense of being celibate.

We cannot justify celibacy on the grounds of being 'more available'. At least, not if we presume that by available we mean free to get up and go at the drop of a hat, or be able to work all the hours that God sends. Availability is not about covering miles or not sleeping because there is a need somewhere. The danger is that the need is in the minister rather than the individual or the community. It is not the case that I am celibate in order to be more available, it is more the case that because I am celibate I may be more available. The availability flows from the fact of being celibate rather than being the cause of it.

But what is this availability? It is not simply bodily presence, it is more the revealing of what makes sense to me. It is availability of heart. It is

about depth of meaning. The celibate person has an opportunity to delve into the heart of the matter, the heart of humanity, teased and challenged by the commitment to plumb the depths of things. The responsibility of becoming more and more celibate is akin to the responsibility to become more and more contemplative in the midst of a frenetic world. It is not so much that I am available, but I am willing to make available how I appreciate things, make sense of things, find meaning in things.

There is a danger that the diocesan priest has been persuaded that availability is a geographical term. One friend of mine said that he has felt at times that he has been riding a motor-cycle on a wall of death, and that he dare not stop in case he falls into a black hole in the middle of something. In our world, we may be more of a witness if we decide to stop and face the black hole and grow through it.

We all have the responsibility to share our faith with one another, explore how we find meaning in our world. The celibate person shares this responsibility, and has the opportunity to ponder in a unique way precisely because he is free from other responsibilities. It is not that he is available because he does not have a wife and family, it is more that he is obliged to ponder in depth because he does not have a wife and family. It is almost that over-activity and busyness are opposed to what celibacy is really about.

The celibacy of the diocesan priest and the celibacy of the vowed religious are not the same. They are not the same, not because their celibacy is different, but because their vocation is different. The diocesan priest witnesses to celibacy in the secular, the immediate fast-changing world, among people living with a variety of vocations.

All of the priests in the group felt that it would be more of a witness if celibacy was a free choice for the diocesan priest, though, I, for one, would be sad if there was ever a time when there was no witness to celibacy among the diocesan priesthood – I believe that the world we live in needs the witness. So, what are we capable of witnessing to?

Well, we have the opportunity to make available the ponderings of the heart. Something of this is expressed quite simply at the beginning of one of the reflections of the *Rule for a new Brother*:¹

Your vow to remain unmarried for the sake of God's kingdom will draw you into the loneliness of the cross of Jesus and reveal the basic loneliness of everyman.

At the same time it invites you to build up a fellowship with Him and to establish the kingdom of love among men.

We also have the opportunity to witness to the fact that it is possible to love and to be loved in a deep personal way without sexual commitment – and our world certainly needs this. We saw earlier how it is presumed that we must have a genital sexual relationship or else we will end up sterile and dried up. We are able to witness to the fact that it is possible to have a friend without the friend being a lover. We are forced to find new languages, to use words, to share feelings verbally, rather than resort to what can be a short cut – sexual expression. As one young couple put it to me recently – it is sometimes easier to take your clothes off than to tell the truth.

The celibate person is forced to learn new languages, new ways of expressing feelings and yearnings. We also have the responsibility to teach these new languages to others. Celibacy is indeed a call to relationship, not a sentence to loneliness, and we need to learn to develop the strengths which enable us to share deeply with others. We are living in a society which insanely operates as though desire and gratification are synonymous and need to be experienced simultaneously. We could actually do the world a favour by helping one another to separate these things out.

There is no doubt that married people can also witness to all of these things equally well – but in a different way. Perhaps the witness of married life to the community is a witness to the presence of God in intimacy, total giving and receiving. Celibacy is a witness to the transcendence of God in everyone and everything. Celibate people need to learn from the witness of the married and take the risk to love and be loved; those who are married could perhaps glimpse from the celibate the call to less possessiveness and the risk of entering into the unknown.

Some conclusions

I think it is true to say that all the priests who met together to ponder the question of celibacy have remained celibate for very different reasons from those which pertained when they took the vow of celibacy. At the same time, there is nothing but respect and concern for colleagues who have chosen to leave the active priesthood because they felt unable to live a celibate life, and genuine compassion for those who remain in the priesthood who are unhappy with the demand. We felt that it was not so much that we had not received any formation regarding celibacy, it was more that we had not received any formation regarding personal development.

We also spoke about what might be a particular struggle for colleagues who are homosexual. We all acknowledged that there is more

and more call by priests for opportunities to talk at this level about love, intimacy, loneliness and the struggle to grow up. Many of us have, or know other priests who have, very close friends of both sexes who help to sustain and nurture one another. There are few enough public role models in the priesthood of close heterosexual friendships, and we were conscious of far fewer role models for homosexual priests.

We are all aware of changes that have taken place in seminary formation over the last twenty years. In fact two of us had spent a good deal of the last twenty years teaching in seminaries. But there are big problems within the system we have at present. The virtual all-male nature of the formation programme, and the almost inevitable 'them and us' distinction between students and staff do not contribute to a healthy experience of community. One priest commented that many of our older colleagues have made sense of celibacy because they saw it as sacrifice, and would identify this sacrifice quite explicitly with the sacrifice of the eucharist and the sacrifice of the cross. It may be that the mystery of the eucharist and the sacrament of total giving in depth could provide a younger generation of priests with a rootedness in celibacy and the eucharist.

I am quite sure that as a group we were getting round to appreciating that we have to live celibacy in a conscious way, rather than let it lurk within us in an unconscious way. If we become more self-aware, and appreciate that celibacy is not simply about sexual activity, but more a whole way of life, then we can, at least, identify where our real needs are rather than act out something we do not fully understand. We saw it as tragic that we have been expected to live a celibate life more as an administrative decision than a journey in faith.

A final word of thanks to my colleagues who shared and risked so much in conversation. I am sure that we agreed that being celibate is no particular witness in itself. Being unmarried, celibate, unhappy, fearful, wealthy or distant from people is certainly a witness, but not a witness to Jesus, the gospel, the Church or the reign of God. We suspect that we have managed to live with compulsory celibacy because we have experienced human love in our own lives and have been fortunate enough to know people who have struggled with us in trying to make sense of celibacy.

None of us would be too surprised if married men were allowed to be ordained in the Catholic Church, though we do not particularly expect men who are already ordained to be given the choice to marry, at least not in the foreseeable future. I think we are prepared for the occasional scandal in the Church rather than have presbyteries, seminaries and monasteries full of emotionally dead people.

Whatever else can be said about celibacy, it is certainly not an inherited condition, and as one priest said to his bishop after buying a three-quarter size bed: 'Well, I'm half expecting a change'.

NOTES

¹ *Rule for a new brother* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), p 16.