

MAKING SENSE OF CELIBACY

By GILLIAN ORCHARD

White childhood¹

I CANNOT RECALL THAT ANY ADULT ever gave me a lesson on sex. I absorbed its mysteries as naturally as the food I ate. There was nothing frightening, or odd, or strange about it. I watched my parents undress, I saw them in the bath, and they saw me – and five brothers and sisters. Besides which, the house was always teeming with animals; questions about procreation, genital difference, mating, reproductive processes, male and female roles, care and responsibility of parents for young arose naturally and often. The Scottish terrier in her basket suckling three pups was only another form of life lived out by my mother and father in their roles as co-creators of a new human being, and as nurturers of an increasingly overcrowded nursery. The only difference as far as I could see was that the Scottie was to all intents and purposes a single parent, and harassed, whereas my parents stayed together and were equally harassed.

Being seven was special: I made my first communion that year. It was a pure white day and I was white all over, inside and outside: white pants, vest, socks, shoes, veil and dress. I felt beautiful and blissful, the happiest person alive. I found myself repeating a line of a thanksgiving prayer I had discovered in my new missal: ‘My heart is like a little church’. It *was* a little church because God was there, and it was a holy place, so *I* was holy. And I wished it would never stop. It was the feast of Saints Peter and Paul: fourteen years later on the same day I entered religious life.

Muddled heart

In processing my life story I will move into ‘shift and replace’ mode, and I start by retracting the opening sentence of the previous section. When I was thirteen, my mother decided that she ought to prepare me for the onset of menstruation. By the time you reach thirteen, there is not much you do not know if you keep your ears and eyes open, sift the evidence accorded to you by your peers, check it against what you learn in biology lessons, and begin reading teenage magazines. We sat in the car outside the grocer’s on a double yellow line and she said her bit. I was

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glad she did: it was reassuring, and she concluded the interview by suggesting that we treat ourselves to a special cake. I realized that it was all much more of a hurdle for her, but I was grateful because her advice was less to do with the physical/biological aspects of growing into womanhood, than with the psychological/emotional changes that would occur.

And they did. The context of upheaval in my mid-teenage years was boarding school. That extended itself to nursery training college, and finally to a period of living at home again. In each of those three places I fell for an adult woman who modelled for me something of the sort of person I wanted to be. This was the painful moonstruck awakening of a deeper capacity to and for love, with a distinct homosexual bias: a common experience, and contained, and to that extent a 'safe' way of exercising immature heartstrings.

But at the time it was agonizing: I groaned and sighed like any Elizabethan lover, took refuge in silent moods and hopeless gloom, fed off romantic songs, and hung about in the hope of meeting the object of my adoration, knowing full well that if I did, I would be sheepish and tongue-tied. It was not a receptive time for religion. I said prayers and attended chapel services because everyone else did, but apart from singing in the choir which did stir devotion occasionally, I lived a life of non-engagement with the things of God. I was more concerned with what other people thought of me.

However, there are remembered moments of grace. At the age of fourteen I was moved by a retreat to consider the Carmelite way. It was heroic and I wanted to do the thing properly. But three days after the retreat, I had forgotten my desire. In the same year I was struck all of a heap during an RE lesson by the phrase 'the kingdom of God is within you' (Lk 17:21). Not out there, or in the sometime future, but *now*, and *here*, and in *me*. I have no idea what the rest of the lesson was about: I just knew I had been let into a secret which I did not understand but which held a mysterious promise, and began to make sense of baptism for me.

Boyfriends were a mixed blessing. Every girl in the class liked to boast of her conquests; as the youngest by several months I felt at a distinct disadvantage. My mother tried to help by choosing the first two boys whom I could boast about. One later tried his vocation as a monk, then married happily; the other joined the diocesan clergy and does sterling work among handicapped people. I often wonder what my mother's criteria of choice were. At the age of eighteen I met a young man of the same age, whom I found attractive in an entertaining, charming and extrovert sort of way. He and I got to know each other in local amateur

operatics, as we sang and danced our merry way through Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer*. It was my first real experience of enjoying the company of the opposite sex. It was also my first introduction to mattress parties. At a rational level I found these insulting and degrading. With my unredeemed heart, I consented to the petting, cuddling and long kissing with pleasure. But in the cold light of day, I knew that these sorts of games were not satisfying; that there was more to love than this, and I wanted to tap into whatever would match up to my desire which was for 'more than'.

I had another insight into a scriptural phrase. This time John gave me the words: 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:16). I knew that human love could be beautiful, and enduring, and selfless: I had seen that in my parents. In all these aspects it mirrored God. And not only did it mirror God, it was part of the love who IS God. But human love could also betray, deceive, manipulate, come to an end. God was, I suddenly realized, *total love*, unchanging, constant, faithful, God could never stop loving because God is always God, whose nature does not alter, and who never gives up on anyone. I found the young man increasingly possessive, even obsessive, and I looked for a way of escape. As luck would have it – or was it providence? – my nursery nurse's training equipped me for work on the European mainland for a few months. On reflection it was a blessed space, and strange things began to happen. After a few weeks I was suddenly seized with a very strong urge to pray. I *wanted* to pray, and I did not know why or what for. All I could tell myself was that it would be for a wonderful thing that would have enormous significance in my life. In my naïveté I thought it had something to do with finding the right partner and settling down to the married state. So I prayed as best I knew which was to say the rosary every night. I should have known that Mary would have a hand in my future choice. Not only was I named after her: I was also at the age of six weeks dedicated to her in the Slipper Chapel at Walsingham. She had her eye on me, and I was using a very powerful prayer in good faith and with innocence as to its outcome.

Early in January 1962, I awoke one morning in a state of shock. I knew precisely why I had been drawn to regular and systematic prayer and where it had been leading. Not what I had expected or hoped for. The call to religious life, to a life of consecration to God, was clear, so clear that it was as if a real voice had spoken in my semi-conscious ear. I was so appalled at the prospect that I shot down to the end of the bed and covered my head with blankets. But it did not go away. I had asked for a relationship of love that would not end and here it was being offered. In the peace and quiet of a few months at home I gradually

came to terms with the implications and realized that in fact I was falling in love, this time for real and for ever.

Labyrinth of choice

I should like to include at this point a few general comments on celibacy as I approached first profession after two years of novitiate. First, when I entered upon the religious state, I did so with my eyes and my heart open and to a degree tested. I was well acquainted with what normal sexual activity meant to most human beings. I did not find it shocking or mucky or shameful or sinful; I believed that the gift of sex was good in itself and an essential part of my humanness. Secondly, I did not attach much weight to the idea of 'giving up' things in a negative sacrificial way when it came to an understanding of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. It was not about deprivation or loss; rather means given to the fulfilment of a vision of life here and beyond. And the hundred-fold began in *this* life.

I was clothed in the full habit – black from head to ankles, a modest cape, white cap and forehead bands, starched collar and cuffs. I felt like a trussed chicken. Everything I wore was designed to help me forget who I was. I had a new identity, a new name, a new way of life, I had left 'the world' behind. That was how it worked in those days, and we novices took it all as a matter of course, a somewhat crazy course, but in an unchanging monastic set-up, we never questioned the wisdom of the training we received. And we had each other's friendship and shared experience. It was not long before we faced trial by classroom. Children wondered whether I had legs, or ate, or functioned like a human being at all. I discarded the habit in favour of an old overall, equally shapeless, and took them wooding and apple-picking on the back of the tractor and trailer at weekends. Bonfire teas were good for both of us. Adults were more difficult to handle: they tended to treat one with misplaced courtesy, respectful up to a point, then as though one were a child or an idiot. As the years went by I became increasingly distressed by the fact that the habit did not encourage people to be truthful. I was painfully aware that I was being told what they thought I would like to hear and that other things were being said behind my back. We were out of step with the world we had promised to serve . . .

So as religious life moved out of novitiate and into university, and eventually into the teaching profession, I began to discover that my hopes of a vision of the vowed life as leading to a fuller, richer, deeper participation in both worlds were not being realized. There was a lot of artificiality in normal human relationships in community which derived

from a paranoid attitude to particular friendships. In not acknowledging my sexuality, I was refusing to accept and use a gift that God had given me, an essential part of my being human and woman. I was therefore living the vowed life lopsidedly, in an over-spiritualized mode. God was inviting me to become *whole* – a harmonious balance of body, soul and spirit – and I was able to offer only a desiccated version in return. Like many others I found myself directing my energies into the work . . .

I became a parody of a religious, a cardboard cut-out, unreal, and without 'felt' inner resources, though I clung on in faith to another part of me where the 'wonderful thing' lay dormant in darkness. Somehow my faithful God was in there, loving me and holding onto me, when I could not love myself or anyone else and felt that I was only going through the motions of living a religious life. God certainly works in mysterious ways: I was asked to take on the headship of the school. One did not refuse in those days, nor did one question the wisdom of higher authority. I knew I was not cut out for the task, but I could not have persuaded anyone.

The job was too much: in the end my body took charge of the situation. I collapsed with a perforated tumour in the lymph glands. It was malignant. I underwent surgery and my life hung in the balance. On returning to consciousness I found I had to wrestle with an unexpected temptation: I could not hand over. There I was on a hospital bed, totally dependent on tubes, physically separated from my desk, and yet psychologically I had to struggle to let go of the duty I had been charged with. On reflection I see that I was reluctant and afraid of facing failure and personal weakness of a kind and depth that I had never faced before. A few days later I woke at 4.30 a.m., and wept, and wept, and felt liberated of a huge and horrible burden. The operation was succeeded by weeks of radiotherapy and months of chemotherapy. By the end of it I felt as stripped as Job: I lost weight, lost my hair, lost the power to control or the will to make decisions, lost the strength to run, or lift, or sing or pray. I felt like a fly with wet wings.

Weakness had indeed invaded my bones (Hab 3:16). The light at the end of the tunnel was real: I had seen it. I knew I was not called that way yet, but it was an immense consolation to know it existed. Like Job much of what I lost was restored. I was peaceful in the knowledge that God was getting through to me the lesson that being strong is not the best or only way. And so I learnt that the advantages I used to have now seemed unimportant; that the most precious gift I had was life itself, and that there were wonderful people around me who also were precious: family, community, friends. In weakness I found the strength of love and

discovered another secret about God, and me and everyone else. Paul's enjoinder to the church at Corinth was often with me: 'Do you not know that you are the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you . . . you are not your own property?' (1 Cor 6:15–20). My horizons were ripe for expansion.

From headship I moved into the direction of novices. Again I thought I was utterly unprepared and I questioned the wisdom of superiors. I felt only half-alive and knew that spiritually I was a burnt-out case. What had I to share with the two young people who presented themselves as candidates? I took up with gratitude the suggestion of a renewal course in Ignatian spirituality, followed by the full Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. And how God worked on me and with me: it was a blessed time of birth as a new creature – in which I began to reclaim the old and rejoice in it. It started with a visit to the hairdresser. For the first time for twenty years I was going to have a professional cut. A sympathetic Holy Child sister came with me, and I appreciated her presence. I was totally out of touch with prices, styles, and what was appropriate for a forty-year-old religious. I started to wear ordinary clothes and enjoyed experimenting with colour and design. For a few weeks I clung to the past and donned a habit on Sundays. But I felt more and more of an anomaly, and I quietly let it go without guilt or regrets. I was grateful that no one, male or female, made any comment or passed any judgement about this strange behaviour. I relaxed with yoga; my battered body grew stronger with the exercise, not to mention the good wholesome food and healthful environment of the retreat house. I began to feel acceptable and accepted. Even the anxiety about the effects of radiotherapy was allayed. I soon discovered that I was still a human being, female of the species, who could fall in love with her director. After initial embarrassment, I found a certain delight in the fact that despite all, I was not such a prune as I had feared! The experience actually did wonders for my self-esteem. He responded with understanding and gentleness, and an objectivity that enabled me to free myself, and allow him to be free. We were good friends, intimate in a non-genital way, appreciative of each other, and respectful of one another's consecration and commitment to celibacy. This experience of human love warmed me back into life at a feeling level and helped me to recognize the need and value of companionship.

The Thirty-day retreat was a labour: perhaps I was trying too hard. It was three weeks afterwards when I was still praying through the Contemplation to obtain Love, and pondering the text 'Come and see' (Jn 1:39) that I experienced the overwhelming reality of God at home in

me with an intensity and truth that was indescribable. The prophecy of Malachi that the Lord I was waiting for would suddenly enter his temple was fulfilled (Mal 3:1). Mary Ward² shares a very similar experience in her retreat notes:

He was very near and within me, *which I never perceived him to be before*.³ I was moved to ask him with great confidence and humility what I came to know, to wit, what he was. I said: 'My God, what art thou?' I saw him immediately and very clearly go into my heart, and little and little hide himself in it . . . He held my heart, I could not work . . .⁴

. . . that holding operation best describes for me the dynamic of consecrated celibacy – something that God does.

The last ten years have been lived in this context of close and loving and mutual relationship. I have, as one writer has said, made myself 'unmarriageable for the sake of the kingdom'⁵ and in doing so I have discovered that celibacy has nothing to do with sexlessness or lack of passion. If anything I am more passionate and aware of the giftedness of my sexuality than I have ever been. It is still possible to fall in love and to be fallen in love with, but I find myself in a process of growing into an experience of deep and ordered love, a type of baptism into original justice, that best describes the whole business of becoming 'bespoke':

. . . for here without entreaty
thou tookest me into thy care,
and by degrees led me from all else
that at length I might see
and settle my love in thee . . .⁶

I feel untied and set free to live the vision for which the vows – all three of them – are given. They have become a trinity of gift, inseparable from each other, purposeful graces that open up endless possibilities for reaching into deeper and richer levels of human experience and relationship. I am in the 'labyrinth of choice', and working in hope and faith towards the centre, towards the One who attracts me to faithful love, seals a covenant with me, invites me to respond in fidelity and freedom, and comes with me on mission: the One who finds our creatureliness good⁷ and is made flesh in me. I realize now that the making of final profession was only a declaration of intent: I had not arrived. I had only just begun a lifetime's outworking of gradual patient growth into the wholeheartedness and integrity that I desire between myself and my God, and which I admire in Mary Ward, for whom the end of the pilgrimage was the same:

I saw suddenly and very clearly that the gift of chastity whether ingrafted in nature or the contrary prevented by grace,⁸ and the knowledge of true good or vanquished by victory and the conquest of many battles, was always a *peculiar gift of God*,⁹ and not conjoined to the nature of flesh and blood, though indued with reason; nor in the power of man thus corrupted, either to bring forth or conserve in himself. I saw withal more perfectly in the bosom of God, the wonderful love, from whence comes, and which always accompanies, the divine gift into whatsoever soul it is infused. Then I acknowledged what I had of this to be wholly his gift. I thanked him for it and asked pardon for thinking it in any part my own, or in my ability to get or keep . . .¹⁰

Reflections of God's gift of celibacy lead me once more to notions of 'White childhood' linked with that lifelong friend I have found in the other Mary, the mother of Jesus. I was clothed and made my vows on the feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception; I celebrated my name day as Emmanuel on the feast of the Incarnation. I pray that Mary's 'fiat' is becoming mine also: God graces me to witness in this place, with this human life, to the eschaton, to that just and joyful, singlehearted contemplation of the truth who is at the heart of all existence and the end of all our loving. John promises us that 'we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is' (1 Jn 3:2) . . . he who found our creatureliness good – a truly tantalizing text that keeps me in the labyrinth and working through the clues.

NOTES

¹ The three subtitles of this article: 'White childhood', 'Muddled heart' and 'Labyrinth of choice' are drawn from a poem by W. H. Auden, '*O da quod iubet Domine*', *Faber book of religious verse* (London, 1972).

² Mary Ward (1585–1645), foundress of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

³ The italics are Mary's own.

⁴ *Till God will: Mary Ward through her writings* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), p 47.

⁵ A. Coggins, cited in 'Consecrated celibacy: gift and challenge', *Best of the Review II*, p 92.

⁶ *Till God will*, p xviii.

⁷ L. Byrne: *Sharing the vision* (SPCK, 1989), p 77.

⁸ *Till God will*, p 43, footnote 57, 'Preventing or prevenient grace is the activity of God's grace preceding or going before any movement of man (sic) towards God.'

⁹ The italics are Mary's own.

¹⁰ *Till God will*, p 43.