

A Radical Choice to Love
Reaching beyond man's fallen nature
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Let me tell you three simple things about celibacy:

First, celibacy is a radical choice to love; and since the object of that love is the Word-made-flesh, the radical choice to live as a celibate opens a man to the possibility of living his life in the most fruitful way imaginable.

Secondly, celibacy is both radical and fruitful for the same reason that Christ in his incarnation is both radical and fruitful. The incarnation is radical because it reveals the full extent of God's desire to save fallen man and at the same time it is fruitful because it allows fallen man to reach beyond his nature, to achieve a supernatural end.

Thirdly, it follows that celibacy is a divine love affair of the most enthralling kind, played out by men who are willing to love as Jesus did, freely and authentically, without ever counting the cost or measuring love's span.

There! Three simple ideas about celibacy that take you beyond the superficial understanding that celibacy is at best the practical consequence of an ordained man's promise to be obedient and is at worst the obligation to endure perpetual frustration as the cost of ordained service. I hope that you might consider celibacy for what it truly is: a gift of love of inestimable value to the Church.

More than an imposition

That celibacy is something much more than a legalistic or practical burden is not an idea that originated with me. I have meditated much of my life on celibacy, using the insights of spiritual writers like Thomas Dubay, S.M., whose compact "... And you are Christ's" is a classic explanation of the charism of virginity and celibacy in the Church. But Dubay's work is not as widely read as it could be and while all of us know men who have chosen to live celibate lives for the sake of the kingdom, too few of us - priests, religious or lay - could adequately explain the mystery of celibate love or why it is such a gift to the Church.

While I do not think that I am up to that task - Father Dubay would surely be a more competent spiritual guide here - still in the weeks ahead I will ordain fourteen deacons and two priests for the Diocese and each one of them - even the married permanent deacons - must begin to love as celibates and for that reason, I would like to share with you the fruits of my long meditation on the meaning of spiritual celibacy.

Certainly there is a legal aspect to celibacy. Before the whole Church, the man who proposes himself for ordained priestly ministry promises the Bishop that he will remain forever unmarried; and in the case of a married permanent deacon, the candidate promises that he will never re-marry should his wife pre-decease him. All of us understand that this is a binding promise with a multitude of consequences, both spiritual and canonical.

(over)

Man is made for God

But while the legal aspect is one way - and perhaps the most common way - of understanding celibacy, it is not, I fear, the truest way, for it is not the most spiritual way. This aspect of celibacy tends to see the promise not to marry (or remarry) as a burden, an obligation imposed as a necessary condition for ordination. How much better it would be for us who receive the true life of grace through the spiritual ministrations of the priest to look for the spiritual meaning of celibacy.

To do that, let's begin with a uniquely Catholic perspective on the nature of man.

Man is made for God, who has put into us the capacity to be loved infinitely well. Only God will complete us, because only his love is infinite. Nothing on earth, and not all the finite things on earth added up together, will ever be enough to satisfy our infinite longing for God. As Saint Augustine prayed, "Thou hast made us for thyself, Oh Lord, and our hearts are restless, until they rest in Thee."

It follows then that since we are made for God alone, until He satisfies us in heaven we will always have an aspect of deep emptiness in our lives. We will always know a loneliness that even the deepest friendship or the happiest marriage will never completely fill. This loneliness can be frightening and it often happens that men and women will try to fill the inner emptiness with things - houses, cars, successes, a series of new relationships, anything to distract them from the unbearable loneliness of life apart from God.

One has only to look at the sad lives of Hollywood's latest celebrities to see how true this is!

The radical choice of the celibate

The celibate, however, refuses to run away from this loneliness or pretend it isn't there. Instead he embraces it and makes it his own. He says to the world, "Heaven, not earth, is where your heart will find its fulfillment. Do not look at this world and seek to discover all its riches; they will not satisfy. Do not think that this world's wealth will make you happy; if you do not know God, your wealth will only increase your poverty"

In effect, the celibate becomes a living signpost. He points to the outline of the heavenly city, just glimpsed over the horizon.

But the celibate does more than point to heaven. He models Christ's love by loving without expecting a return, by loving simply because "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God..." (1 John 4:16) He can love freely because having already accepted life's loneliness, he can love without demanding a response in love. The celibate is open to loving those who will not or cannot love him back because he has already embraced the pain of being unfulfilled, and has chosen to love without expecting to be loved in turn.

Celibacy - seen from a spiritual perspective - is a way of loving freely and authentically, after the measure of God and in the model of Christ's own love.