

Celibate chastity: an affair of the heart

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Does it surprise you to learn that some of the most sexual people I know also live lives of celibate chastity? Spend time with any one of them, and you will be left with this lasting impression: here is a person who is deeply spiritual and profoundly human. So, all the bad press about celibate chastity these last few years troubles me. When young people, for example, cite it as a possible explanation for the scarcity of vocations to priesthood and religious life, I think of the people mentioned just above, and fail to make the connection.

And, yes, recent and tragic reports of child abuse, and other sexual scandals, involving priests and men and women religious have led more than a few people to question whether a life of celibate chastity leads eventually to stunted emotional and psychological growth. But the lives of the celibate chaste people I know certainly challenge this line of reasoning.

The notion that celibate chastity plays a major role in our current vocation crisis or is a contributing factor to incidents of sexual misconduct by clerics and men and women religious has given rise to some skewed thinking. For example, conventional wisdom now suggests that sexuality has become a major preoccupation among sisters, priests and brothers today. And that is simply not the case. Like everyone else, priests and religious need ongoing and adequate knowledge about human sexuality. But spirituality, rather than sexuality, has to be our chief and constant preoccupation. And why is that so? Because we can learn all there is to know about human sexuality, but if we fail to confront what it means to be a spiritual person, we will always be uneasy with our life of celibate chastity.

I have three aims in writing this article. First of all, to offer a definition of celibate chastity. Second, to remind us all about the central place of Jesus in any discussion of the topic. Third, to suggest that celibate chastity, embraced and lived well, is all about a revolution of the heart. With that said, let's begin.

Celibate chastity defined

How best to describe celibate chastity? One way, perhaps the best way, certainly one of the most honest ways, is simply to say it is an affair of the heart. No one wants to live without love. Consequently, if a life of celibate chastity fails to lead those who live it into greater union with God and others, who would be so foolish as to embrace it? So, first and foremost, celibate chastity is an affair of the heart.

But any life of celibate chastity is also marked by four distinct characteristics. The first, pursuing and developing ways of loving that are non-genital, is the most obvious. If you or I met a man or woman who claimed to live a life of celibate chastity, and yet, at the same time told us that he or she also maintained an active genital life, wouldn't we be perplexed?

Unfortunately, the words intimacy and sexuality have, all too often, been equated solely with genital sex. But most of us understand that these words convey a far richer and more complex message, associated as they are with diffuse and symbolic meanings and psychological and cultural orientations. Sexuality has to do with my self-understanding and way of being in this world as male or female. It includes my attitudes about my body and the bodies of other people, the attitudes and characteristics that I have appropriated about what my culture defines as masculine and feminine, and my affectional orientation toward my own and the opposite sex.

A person choosing a life of celibate chastity puts his or her emphasis on developing and pursuing ways of loving, rather than on genital behavior or his or her lack of it. To live a loveless life of celibate chastity is a contradiction in terms, as much as is insisting that genital sex and celibate chastity are compatible.¹

A second characteristic of celibate chastity? My choice for it must conform to my call in life and my call to ministry. Simply put: does my choice for celibate chastity feel as though it fits in with the rest of my life? Consider for a moment the reassurance felt by a man or woman who realizes that he or she has married the right person. Many celibate chaste men and women have the same experience. They cannot imagine living another life. To do so would be similar to living someone else's life.

A third characteristic of people who live out their sexuality in a celibate chaste manner is their choice not to be coupled. This third characteristic of celibate chastity is more challenging today than it was in the past. Our contemporary society

more as a couple. In a society that values and reinforces coupling, celibate chaste men and women quickly come to understand that they are not like most people.

But spirituality, a fourth characteristic that marks a life of celibate chastity, is, without exception, the most important. Consequently, the remainder of this article will be devoted to discussing spirituality and its central place in any life of celibate chastity. Let's begin by making these two points. One, to be lived well, a person's celibate chastity must be rooted deeply in the spiritual life. Two, if faith and my relationship with God are not at the center of my life of celibate chastity, it will eventually make little sense to me, or to anyone else.

Spirituality

If we agree that spirituality lies at the heart of any life of celibate chastity, then before going any further we need to arrive at an agreement about the meaning of that word and to understand its many dimensions. Theologian Ronald Rolheiser gives us a new appreciation of spirituality when he suggests that it has more to do with the unquenchable fire that burns within each of us than with pious practices.

In his view, growth in the spiritual life is, more than anything else, a process of creatively disciplining the fiery energy—or passion—that flows through us.² And what gives us the courage to undertake this task? The fact that our hunger and thirst for God far exceed our selfishness and greed.³

Many of us claim to possess passion enough for two or three lifetimes! And we have little trouble admitting that this driving force, lying at the center of our human experience, is the source of the love, creativity, and hope that we bring to life. But passion has more than one face. More often than not, it appears in the form of unbridled longing or desire and we describe it as a hunger, an unquenchable flame, or a wildness that cannot be tamed. This face of our passion leaves us restless, dissatisfied, and frustrated. And, in the midst of all this unrest, just what is spirituality? Ultimately, it's what we do with our passion.

New understanding of spirituality

This approach to spirituality is not what most of us were taught during our early years, and well into adulthood, and surely not in seminaries and other houses of formation. We got off to a false start because we were led to believe that to be fit for God, we had painstakingly to ascend a ladder of virtues. But any relationship with Jesus comes at his initiative, not ours. The saints and mystics in church history came to accept eventually Jesus' great love for each of them. Teresa of Avila, for example, often said that when she lacked the words for prayer, she went into her convent chapel and sat before the Blessed Sacrament, so that the Lord could look on her with love. Unlike Teresa, few of us appear willing to believe that God loves us in such an unconditional way.

We have evidence, then, that desire and longing, what we have been calling passion, play an important role in our spiritual life. But passion's power is ambitious. It also appears to be at work in other areas of our life where strong emotions hold sway. For example, whenever we experience anger and rage, passion is close at hand. So, too, in situations of profound sadness and ecstatic joy. Why be surprised, then, with the suggestion that passion holds a place of prominence in our sexual lives? Rolheiser not only suggests that spirituality and sexuality are closely related, he goes a step further and insists that sexuality—this positive, but also most powerful and dangerous of all the fires that burn within us—lies at the heart of any life worth calling spiritual.

Sexuality defined

But what does the word sexuality imply? As pointed out already, surely something more than genital sex. Its Latin root, *secare*, means to be cut off or severed from the whole. And isn't that our experience in life? From our earliest days, we feel incomplete and lonely, and long for some kind of union. Well before the genital sexual awakening that comes with puberty, don't we find ourselves reaching out to others in friendship?

Similarly to spirituality, sexuality also wears more than one face. While it gives us a zest for living, contributes to romance in a relationship, and is the source of unusual courage and heroic generosity, this very same energy also can lead us into self-destructive and dehumanizing behavior. On those occasions when we lose our sense of balance, sexuality contributes to our running about out of control.

Are means available to help us channel our sexual longing and desire in creative ways, ways that lead us away from self-defeating behavior and toward union with God and others? There are actually several. A sense of discipline, a capacity for honest self-appraisal, an ability to tolerate solitude, and a sense of humor. For a life of celibate chastity to be fruitful, all are essential.

And for centuries now, spiritual directors have recommended these same tools to men and women with a serious interest in their religious growth. And their recommendation stands to reason. After all, our degree of integration in body, mind and spirit depends, to a large extent, upon the disciplines and habits by which we choose to live. The quality of our relationships with God, others, our world, and ourselves also is influenced by these very same choices.

What is our challenge, then, when it comes to sexuality and spirituality? To become friends with the passion within us and, at the same time, accept the fact that we are unfinished. Though our culture teaches us otherwise, we cannot have it all. We must, instead, learn to live with tension in both our spiritual and sexual lives. Augustine was right—in this life we cannot answer fully this fundamental question of faith: On whom or what do I set my heart? Our hearts remain restless until they rest fully in God.

Spirituality and celibate chastity

If sexuality lies at the center of the spiritual life, the spiritual life is likewise at the heart of genuine celibate chaste living.⁴ As mentioned earlier, a failure on our part to take on the identity of a religious person leaves us always ill at ease with our celibate chastity. To be at home with our choice for celibate chastity, then, we have to face—first and foremost—what it means to be a religious person.

And what does that task require? To begin with, that we accept the fact that Jesus is the answer to the question that is every human life.⁵ Consequently my relationship with him rests at the center of my life. And concretely that means putting aside time to nurture this relationship and allowing Jesus to be himself. Healthy relationships foster the freedom of all involved. My relationship with Jesus should be no different.

Jesuit Thomas Green uses the image of a well to illustrate this last point.⁶ He compares the consoling grace found in our relationship with Jesus to water bubbling to the surface of a well, almost to the point of overflowing. Early in our relationship with the Lord, we are young and strong and can easily draw water from the well. We have available to us as much of God's consoling grace as we desire. But let's be honest: we are in charge, not Jesus.

With the passage of time the water level in the well begins to drop. But we still have our strength, and so, with human effort, we continue to lower a bucket into the well and draw forth as much consoling grace as we like. But we remain in control. Jesus continues to be kept at a distance. Eventually, however, that well, once brimming with water, dries up. And no longer young and strong, we lack the self-sufficiency of our earlier years. So, we ask ourselves: what can we do now to gain the consoling grace of God? An honest response: nothing, except to sit and wait for the rain. When we arrive at this point in our spiritual life, we are better able to allow Jesus to be at least an equal partner in our relationship. We give him the freedom to love us as he sees fit. And how do we know that we are moving in this direction? When, like Teresa, we long only for a simple presence before God. Nothing more, and nothing less.

The second characteristic of a religious person builds upon the first: we accept the fact that Jesus loves us in a singular and special way. From the beginning of time, God has reached out to us in relationship, with Jesus being the most stunning example of that initiative. Every friendship that we have in life develops in a distinct and unrepeatable manner. So, too, our relationship with Jesus and its pattern of development are unique. They cannot be duplicated. Everyone's spirituality must be tailor-made to reflect these realities.

Unfortunately, throughout life many of us are presented with formulas and plans of action that carry with them some guarantee of success in the spiritual life but, unfortunately, fail to respect the unique relationship that we have with Jesus. Rather than enhancing that relationship, a number of these methods only get in the way.

Awakening

Third, to be a religious person we need to remain open to the spiritual awakenings that take place in our lives, and be willing to explore the longing and desire that are so much a part of each of them. During the adolescent years, most of us experience a sexual awakening. Powerful sexual feelings, genital desire, and a feeling of urgency mark it.

A spiritual awakening is similar. When our natural spirituality wakes up, intense spiritual desire begins to emerge. The process can be dramatic, as in a conversion experience, or—as is more common—gradual. When the latter occurs, we notice that, over time, our desire for God begins to grow. Finally, as a religious person we accept the fact that we don't have to do anything to be worthy of God's love. It is given freely to us with no strings attached. We can say "yes" to it or reject it, but the idea of having to earn God's love is just out of the question. This last quality of a religious person is the most difficult for most of us to accept. And why is this so? In part, because we are embarrassed by God's unrestrained passion for us.

Spiritual growth

We pay a price when getting involved with Jesus on his terms. After all, he asks us to imitate him, not admire him. And that means embracing the Paschal Mystery. If we seek transformation, we must first learn to be at home with suffering and death. How does any relationship with Jesus develop, and what is needed to sustain it? To begin with, throughout the ages, spiritual writers have insisted that times of personal prayer are an essential part of any relationship with the Lord. And for that bond to deepen, these moments of prayer must eventually grow to be regular and prolonged. What does the phrase—regular and prolonged—mean concretely? Ideally, an hour each day.

You and I have the pleasure of Jesus' company 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If we are serious about our relationship with him, we will want to return the favor by providing Jesus with the pleasure of our company for at least one hour each

the idea of trying to find another uninterrupted hour for personal prayer in the midst of an already busy day. So we ask defensively: Aren't those with a call to contemplative life better able to respond courageously to the challenge of finding an "extended period" for prayer each day? Jesus realizes that I am burdened already with a busy apostolic life; he will understand. So much remains to be done, and already there are hardly sufficient hours in the day to accomplish my tasks.

The busyness that marks the lives of many of us in religious life and priesthood today borders on the pathological. For some of us, it is the single greatest threat to our interior life. For what reason? The three spiritnumbing elements that lie at the heart of this type of busyness: narcissism, pragmatism, and unbridled restlessness.⁷

Narcissistic people are excessively self-preoccupied. While any spirituality can become overly privatized— a "Jesus and I" cult of self-indulgence—the narcissism of overly busy people gives rise to just the opposite problem: a lack of sufficient interiority to sustain any significant degree of intimacy with the Lord.

Pragmatism is a second enemy of the interior life. Preoccupied with efficiency, pragmatic people focus almost exclusively on work, achievement, and life's practical concerns.

Unbridled restlessness is a third foe of our spiritual life. Those of us who suffer from this malady greedily seek out one experience after another. Neil Postman describes this state of affairs as "amusing oneself to death."⁸ Unfortunately, the distraction that unbridled restlessness introduces into our lives interferes with our ability to develop a spirit of solitude, hospitality, and genuine prayer.

Joy

In contrast, in the lives of those who pray regularly, the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit are evident. Numbered among those fruits are charity, a spirit of joy, patience, forbearance, faith, and reverence for oneself and others. Among the gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, piety, fortitude, and fear of the Lord. As we look at our lives today, let's ask ourselves first: are the fruits and gifts of the Spirit present? What if we find them wanting in our own life? Then we need to wonder about how seriously we take our relationship with Jesus. More importantly, we must decide which aspects of our lives we must change in order to bring our practice into line with what we espouse publicly. Our Christian life, at its heart, is all about a relationship with Jesus. That relationship is the solution for our restiveness. It is also the place that must be at the center of my life of celibate chastity.

Additional aids to prayer

In addition to embracing the Paschal Mystery and the twin supports of personal prayer and integrity in our moral life, what other practices did Jesus prescribe to ensure a healthy spiritual life? Three come to mind. One, a passion for justice; two, a grateful heart; three, concrete involvement within an historical community of faith.

Why be surprised that involvement in creating justice for the poor is an essential element of the spiritual life? For Jesus, there were two basic commandments: love God, and love your neighbor. In spelling out their details, he bluntly tells us that we will be judged on how we treat people who are poor. The way in which we treat them will be equated to the way in which we treat God.

A grateful heart is another important element in the spiritual life. After all, to be a saint is to be fuelled by gratitude. It stands to reason, then, that only grateful hearts will ever be able to transform our world spiritually. The tale of the prodigal son illustrates this last point. Both sons are "away from their father's house"; one through infidelity and weakness, the other due to bitterness and anger. Either son was entitled to his inheritance, even while his father was alive. But the latter, for as long as he lived, was to be guaranteed the interest gained on any assets transferred to one or another of his sons. In taking his inheritance and moving to a foreign land, the younger son denied his father his due interest. He sinned, not because of his loose living in a foreign land, but because he figuratively wished his father dead.⁹

Compassion and sexuality

But his older brother was no better. Yes, he did all the right things, but for all the wrong reasons. There was no celebration in his heart. Jesus asks us to avoid imitating either son and, instead, encourages us to look to the grateful heart of the father and to take on his compassion. The story of the prodigal son reminds us also that compassion is often cited as the sign of a wellintegrated sexuality. Why? Because the social goal of solitude—that quality so necessary in any life of celibate chastity—is compassion, its spiritual goal, contemplation.

Finally, spirituality has both an individual and a community focus. God calls us not only as particular persons but also as a group.¹⁰ Some of us find that fact hard to accept. We want God but we don't want institutions such as the church. Their humanity and its sinfulness embarrass us. The search for the face of God, however, must have a communal dimension, it can never be solely an individual quest. In accepting our church's human face, we come to accept our own a bit more fully.

Naïve and foolish

judged as being somewhat naïve and foolish. If truth be told, embracing a life of celibate chastity is both naïve and foolish. Naïve, because the choice defies social convention; foolish, because to embrace and live well a life of celibate chastity leads inevitably to a revolution of the heart. What philosopher Bernard Lonergan reminds us is akin to an other worldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations.¹¹

And who among us wants to undergo such a conversion, to embrace this revolution of the heart? Herein lies the challenge of celibate chastity: while people may be judged to be naïve and foolish in choosing to live out their sexuality in this manner, they also commit themselves to live with passion, to be deeply spiritual and sexual at the same time. Simply put, they rediscover the fire—that longing for the Lord—that has always burned brightly within them. In this rediscovery they grow to be more at home with themselves and with the Lord, but now on his terms and with infinitely more knowledge about his ways. The description “deeply spiritual and profoundly human” is the only one that is apt.

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