



LIVING CELIBACY:

A PROPOSED MODEL FOR CELIBACY FORMATION PROGRAMS

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Forming men and women for a life of celibate chastity can be a daunting task for new and even established formation directors who struggle to identify the most appropriate content, systems of delivery, and resources available for their work. One of the particular challenges to celibacy formation lies in the fact that while the expectations of celibate chastity are fairly simple and straightforward (i.e., abstaining from marriage and genital sexual expression), the actual lived experience of celibacy is a highly complex phenomenon the experience of which differs greatly from individual to individual and across the course of a person's lifespan. Formation staff should ideally take into account both of these variables—individual differences and longitudinal factors—when constructing a celibacy formation program.

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Despite the relative abundance of writings on the theology, history and spirituality of celibate chastity, a recent review of the literature uncovered few concrete and implementable models for formation. Those available are targeted at priestly formation. *The Program for Priestly Formation*, Fifth Edition (2006), for example, offers a valuable list of skills to be fostered among candidates pursuing a life of clerical celibacy and goes on to identify the delivery systems to accomplish this work in the life of the seminary. These include: instruction; personal reflection; community life and feedback; application to the tasks of seminary life; formation advisors, mentors and directors; spiritual direction; and psychological counseling. In 1999, the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) published a resource book for the celibacy formation of diocesan priests (Krenik, 1999). Here, Krenik proposes seven guiding elements to be used in celibacy formation with graduate seminarians: internalization of presbyteral values; pattern of contemplative prayer; capacity for solitude; age-appropriate psychosexual development; capacity for intimacy in human friendships; experience of community support; and accountability to others. The NCEA document, although brief, makes some helpful contributions by recommending some specific content, resources, and guiding questions for addressing each of these guiding principles of priestly celibacy formation. In our review of the literature, no published models for celibacy formation for men and women religious were identified.

This article represents an attempt to articulate a framework within which to construct celibacy formation programs adaptable to use in both seminaries and men's and women's religious communities. This framework has grown out of several years of work, reading and research in the areas of celibacy formation, human sexuality, and clergy child sexual offense. The heuristic values which underlie the model include:

- Providing a simple and concrete framework from which to begin constructing or continue organizing a program for celibacy formation.

- Providing a framework that is adaptable to both clerical and religious formation.
- Providing a framework which is consistent with the directives provided in the main formation documents for priestly formation – i.e., *Pastores dabo vobis* (John Paul, II, 1996) and the *Program for Priestly Formation*, Fifth Edition (2006).
- Providing a framework that can be used in both men's and women's communities.
- Providing a framework that accounts for individual differences among candidates.
- Providing a framework that is adaptable for screening purposes and ongoing formation.

A final note by way of introduction has to do with the distinction between celibacy and chastity. Within our Catholic teaching, chastity refers to the responsible living out of one's gift of sexuality, to which all Catholics are called. Celibacy refers to the more particular call to a life of abstinence from marriage and genital expressions of sexuality. Throughout this article, the terms "celibacy" and "celibate chastity" are used interchangeably. For our purposes, when the terms "celibacy" or "the celibate life" are used, the notion of chastity should also be assumed.

OVERVIEW

When approaching celibacy formation with the men and women I work with, I often begin by referring to celibacy as a "box" in which they have placed themselves, the parameters of which are clearly defined: abstaining from marriage and genital expressions of sexuality. While these parameters apply equally to everyone in the celibacy box; the subjective experience of living the chaste celibate life differs from person to person, and is influenced by a number of important factors which include (but are not necessarily limited to): one's motives for choosing celibacy; one's theology (or theologies) of celibacy; the sexual identity which he or she brings to the enterprise of celibacy; one's strengths and skills for living the celibate life; and finally, one's

• Motives for Celibacy → Strengths & Skills for Living Celibate Chastity

• Theologies of Celibacy → Limitations for Living Celibate Chastity

• Sexual Identity:

Sex + Gender + Sexual Orientation
+History of Sexual Experiences
+Values & Attitudes Regarding Sex

personal limitations for living a life of celibate chastity.

This notion of celibacy as *lived experience* is summarized in the illustration above in which the solid outline represents the basic expectations that help to define the life of celibate chastity, and the contents within the box describe the factors that accommodate for each person's unique experience of living out the celibate commitment.

Building on the U.S. Bishops' insight that human formation, including celibacy formation, "happens in a three-fold process of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-gift" (*PPF*, 2006, p. 33), I would like to make two important assertions: (1) that these factors outlined above (i.e., motives for celibacy, theologies of celibacy, sexual identity, and strengths/skills and limitations for living celibate chastity) are those aspects of the self that men and women in formation must know and accept about themselves in order to make a free and healthy choice of celibate chastity; and (2) that these factors can serve as the broad outline or framework for an effective celibacy formation program. Within this framework, the primary goal of the celibacy formation program is to give candidates the information and skills needed to know and accept themselves along each of these dimensions.

For the remainder of this article, I would like to outline each of these variables and propose them as major content areas when building a model for initial or ongoing celibate formation.

MOTIVES FOR CELIBACY

To freely choose the celibate life, a young woman or man must have a clear sense of her or his motives. One of the first questions to ask is: "What has landed you in the celibacy box?" It is the most basic question; however,

I am frequently amazed at how little thought candidates have given it. "Are you choosing celibacy simply because it comes along with the territory of priesthood/religious life, or are there other reasons why you believe a life of celibacy will be a good and responsible way of living out your sexuality as a Christian?"

Of course, it is almost always the case that one's motives for celibacy are multiple and multi-layered—some known to the individual and some unknown or "subconscious," as we psychologists like to say. It is also likely that in the course of one's religious or priestly life, these motives may change, shift, become clearer or even be grown into.

Sr. Sandra Schneiders (2001) nicely addresses motives for celibacy in her book *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life*, and raises the question of valid versus invalid motives. She provides a fairly comprehensive list of what she considers invalid motives, including: fear of marriage, sexuality and parenthood; denial of one's sexual desires; unresolved parent issues; sexual naiveté; confusion about sexual orientation; desire for same-sex environment in which to gain access to possible sexual partners; and desire for an environment that will help control undesirable, dysfunctional, or addictive sexual behaviors or desires. Schneiders concludes that a candidate's motivation for choosing celibacy must not have psychosexual or psychosocial dysfunction at its roots, and this is a most important point. We have seen the tragic consequences, not only for the candidate but also for those who share his or her life, when a priest or religious has chosen celibacy as a means of avoiding painful questions about sexuality or even as a means of entering an arena in which to gratify harmful sexual impulses.

Without denying any of Schneiders' assertions, I would add a slight nuance by making the distinction between a person's initial and ultimate motives for choosing celibacy. While I agree whole-heartedly that one's motives at the time of ordination or final vows must be valid, healthy and capable of sustaining a life of celibate chastity, it is not unusual for individuals to make an initial choice of celibacy (i.e., when entering a formation program) based on less than valid motives. This distinction between initial versus ultimate motives recognizes the possibility that someone who has landed himself in the celibacy box for less healthy or invalid reasons, may in the course of initial formation grow into an understanding, love and motivation for celibacy that holds promise for a life of celibacy well lived.

Concerning motives for celibacy, four primary goals for formation stand out: (1) to clarify the candidate's initial motives for choosing celibacy (i.e., what has landed him/her in the celibacy box?); (2) to assist the candidate in evaluating the validity and health of these motives; (3) to assist the candidate in exploring additional, healthy motivating factors for living the celibate life; and finally (4) in the months leading to ordination or final profession, to assist the candidate in raising and answering the question: Do I currently have motivations that are capable of sustaining a life of celibate chastity with all of its particular challenges and opportunities for personal and spiritual growth?

This work of examining and exploring motives for celibacy ideally begins at initial screening, and continues throughout the course of initial formation with the likelihood of more and less intensive periods of exploration along the way. While one would certainly reach a point of diminishing returns by keeping the issue constantly on the radar, a routine

and regular raising of the question (once a semester, for example) emphasizes its importance and helps both the candidate and the formation directors see patterns of thought and understanding related to this most important question. The work of examining motives occurs in a variety of formation settings, including spiritual direction, reading, coursework, interviews with more experienced community members, meetings with formation personnel and individual counseling.

Some questions that might help direct this work include:

1. Why do you think you have chosen a life of celibate chastity, so far?
2. How have your motives for living the celibate life changed in the course of formation?
3. Can you imagine yourself in another vocation that doesn't require celibacy?
4. If celibacy were not required of priests, do you think you would still choose to be celibate?

THEOLOGIES OF CELIBACY

Ultimately, our strongest motives for living the celibate life are theological.

Like most disciplines that we embark upon in the spiritual life, celibacy is not an end unto itself, but rather a means to some further end, for example, "for the sake of the kingdom," or to achieve an "undivided love for Christ." Common to all theologies of celibacy is the notion that its practice must result in conversion to Christ and an increased capacity for love—love of God and love of neighbor, including an increased capacity to be the recipient of God's and our neighbor's love.

There are, of course, many theologies of celibacy some of which are historically linked to contemplative traditions while others grow out of more apostolic expressions of religious and clerical life. Celibacy as a means of freeing one's time, energies and availability to serve a wider group of people (i.e., "Celibacy for the sake of the kingdom") is a theology that fits particularly well with diocesan priesthood and life in apostolic religious orders. A spousal theology of celibacy which emphasizes the celibate as pursuing an undivided or unmediated love for Christ ought to find particular emphasis among celibacy formation programs in contemplative communities. Celibacy as asceticism, as a means of conquering the passions, and as a means of participating more deeply in the life of Christ,

are also important theologies of celibacy linked to different charisms within the church.

There is benefit in exploring the range of theologies of celibacy with seminarians and with young religious regardless of the apostolic or contemplative bent that characterizes their particular vocation's charism. All of these theologies support, help to motivate, and give meaning to the celibate life, the challenges and realities of which are likely to shift over the course of a single priestly or religious life.

When planning a formation curriculum to serve newcomers in the theologies of celibacy, formation personnel will likely want to begin by surveying the church's theology of sexuality with particular emphasis on the notion of chastity. These are foundational pieces which help candidates to recognize their particular call to celibacy as rooted in the broader call to chastity, a call which they share with married couples and single people living in the church. The *Catechism* and Pope John Paul's "Theology of the Body" are popular and excellent resources for addressing the more general topic of Catholic sexuality. For a survey of theologies of celibacy, Schneiders (2001) again offers a nice overview within an historical context. Building on these more foundational



pieces, formation personnel may look to the writings of their community's founders, the church fathers and mothers, and particular saints or theologians associated with their tradition to flesh out the theology and spirituality of celibacy associated with their community's charism.

An intellectual understanding of the theologies of celibacy gained through instruction and reading should then be complemented by instruction in and opportunities for practicing theological reflection on the celibate life. Theological reflection assists the candidate in deepening and personalizing his or her theological understanding of what it means to live the celibate life. The young man or woman who spends time looking for and recognizing the promised fruits of celibacy is not only likely to remain faithful to that promise in the long run, but also to hone and fine tune skills for celibacy and conversion as his or her priestly or religious life continues.

SEXUAL IDENTITY

Thomas Aquinas teaches that "grace builds on nature" and it is precisely our human nature, and in particular our nature as sexual beings, that one brings to the enterprise of celibate chastity. Sexual identity, then, is the third major component to be addressed in this model of celibacy formation.

Both *Pastores dabo vobis* (John Paul II, 1992) and the *Program for Priestly Formation*, Fifth Edition (2006) underscore the importance of a responsible education in human sexuality, properly integrated into the larger context of human formation and formation for celibate chastity. Here, perhaps more than other dimensions of celibacy formation, formation personnel may feel at a loss in knowing exactly what to cover and who is best qualified to teach this material. Additionally, directors may feel shy or simply unqualified to address issues of human sexuality with young men and women whose knowledge and experience may be more extensive than their own. Given the complexity and sometimes skewed nature of information available in the area of human sexuality, it is

recommended that formation personnel work at building a relationship with a medical or mental health professional or agency who is both qualified in understanding the body of research literature on human sexuality and also able to appreciate the complexity of these issues as they interface with our Catholic faith. Treatment centers around the country which specialize in work with clergy and religious are excellent resources for help along these lines.

In my work with men in formation, I progress along a five-factored model of sexual identity that serves both as an outline for course material, and as a framework for understanding what constitutes a healthy and integrated sexual identity. This model is expressed in an equation of sorts:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Sexual Identity} = & \\ & \text{Sex} + \\ & \text{Gender} + \\ & \text{Sexual Orientation} + \\ & \text{History of Sexual Experiences} + \\ & \text{Values \& Attitudes regarding Sexuality} \end{aligned}$$

Just as our identity is complex and highly individual, so is our sexual identity complex and particular to the person. When screening men and women for seminary or religious life, I typically ask candidates to describe themselves as a sexual person. Candidates often reduce their sexual identities to their sexual history and some reduce their identities to their sexual orientation. Few are able to articulate a sense of themselves as sexual beings beyond these ideas. I will briefly describe these five facets included in my working model of sexual identity.

One's **sex**, technically speaking, is one's biologically determined status as male or female. Sex, as opposed to gender, is a dichotomous phenomenon: we are either male or female. Our sex is determined by chromosomes and unfolds in our physiology as a result of critical periods in the second trimester of pregnancy and at puberty. With the extremely rare exceptions of Androgen-Insensitivity Disorder and Adrenogenital Syndrome, one's sex is straightforward and typically not a source of great confusion for young men and women.

Gender is a more continuous, psychological and subjective sense of one's self as male or female. When talking about gender, we use the language of masculinity and femininity to describe constructs that are influenced by many factors, including our sex, our environment, the larger culture, and social expectations. Every culture has a range of models and norms linked to what it means to be masculine and feminine and these form the basis of many gender stereotypes. While addressing issues of gender, it is useful to explore the idea of androgyny, in the correct meaning of that construct. Often misconstrued as gender neutrality, androgyny more accurately refers to an individual's capacity to incorporate qualities and personality characteristics stereotypically associated with the opposite gender into his or her personality without necessarily compromising the individual's primary sense of himself as male or herself as female. A priest who aims to increase his capacity for patience, listening, emotional support, and appreciation of beauty, for example, might be considered androgynous. The research literature on androgyny suggests that it is associated with certain desirable personal and interpersonal characteristics such as higher levels of behavioral flexibility, competence, confidence in decisions and nurture (Crooks & Baur, 2005).

Sexual orientation has to do with the "primary and persistent" targets of our sexual arousal (Ellis & Mitchell, 2000), and is typically described using the terms heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual. In our culture and in many others, there are strong social desirability factors associated with sexual orientation that sometimes play a role in one's identifying him- or herself as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. Adding to the effects of social desirability, arguments in various circles of discourse around issues of cause, choice, changeability and morality of sexual orientation can also complicate the path for some in arriving at a clear understanding and acceptance of his or her sexual orientation. It is especially important that vocations and formation staff have access to accurate scientific information as well as

a thorough knowledge of church teaching on their way to establishing a clear and consistent set of policies and practices related to admission and formation of individuals with homosexual or bisexual orientations. Formation programs that avoid addressing issues of sexual orientation may inadvertently communicate that the issue is either taboo or unimportant, or may enable a young man or woman to continue living in a state of confusion regarding his or her sexual orientation. Research on clergy sexual offenders points to confusion about one's sexual orientation (rather than a particular heterosexual or homosexual orientation) as a key factor contributing to sexual offense against minors (John Jay College Research Team, 2011; Rossetti, 1996).

History of sexual experiences is a fourth factor that helps to make up one's sexual identity. This includes an individual's history of dating, sexual activity and the possibilities of harmful, extreme and deviant sexual experiences (e.g., victim of abuse, perpetrator of abuse, high-risk sexual behaviors, promiscuity, sexual activity in early childhood). An individual with an extensive history of sexual activity may have a very different experience of celibacy than someone who has never dated, held hands, or even imagined themselves as married or in a committed relationship with another. Equally important as one's history of sexual experiences are the reasons and motivations that have resulted in that history. A 30-year-old candidate who has never dated or engaged in any kind of physical affection with another adult should be invited at the time of screening and again in the course of formation to explore why he or she has never considered these as possibilities. An additional topic to be addressed both in screening and education of candidates is Internet pornography use. Vocation and formation personnel should not be surprised by the high incidence of Internet pornography use among young men and women, and education about indicators of compulsivity and addiction relative to Internet pornography is recommended for both vocations and formation personnel and candidates alike.

Finally, one's **values and attitudes regarding sexuality** are an important factor in how we experience and express ourselves as sexual people. These attitudes may include repulsion, fear, avoidance or distrust of sexuality in general, as well as attitudes related to more specific sexual topics such as homosexuality, premarital sex, sex roles, gender stereotypes, respect for members of the opposite sex and comfort around sexual stimuli. Our attitudes and values are typically formed by parents in the early and middle childhood years, and then influenced more heavily by peers and the broader culture throughout adolescence and young adulthood. Faith and religious experience are also important potential influences on the development of a person's attitudes and values regarding sexuality.

When it comes to screening and educating candidates in the area of sexual identity, formation personnel should be looking for integrity or internal consistency among these five dimensions. We might say that one's sexual identity has a sense of integrity when all parts of his or her sexual identity are known and working well together. Particular concerns arise when different dimensions of one's sexual identity are repressed or when they come into conflict with one another. Such conflicts can result in internal dissonance that can further result in extreme defensiveness and limitations in one's ability to enter freely into the experience of formation and ministry. A young woman, for example, whose overly harsh and negative values about homosexuality is in conflict with her experience of herself as attracted to other women may become compartmentalized, intellectualized or even avoidant in order to deal with that tension. These concerns may play out in problematic ways, for example, when entering into conversations about sexuality in formation. Such tensions might also affect her ministry and community life with those who, in one way or another, remind her of these threatening attractions or unacceptable parts of her identity.

Again, formation staff may wish to collaborate with mental health professionals who can assist in suggesting

readings and offering instruction, workshops, and counseling services when requested or needed.

SKILLS AND LIMITATIONS FOR CELIBATE CHASTITY

Finally, formation staff must be able to foster and evaluate a candidate's skills for celibate living. *The Program for Priestly Formation, Fifth Edition* (2006) provides a helpful list of skills to be fostered among clerical candidates, and these include: appropriate self-disclosure; capacity for self-reflection; capacity for solitude; ability to hold all persons in the mystery of God; vigilance and mastery over one's impulses; capacity for peer relationships; effective boundary setting; care for others; commitment to mastering sexual temptations; and capacity for giving and receiving love.

Both the *Program for Priestly Formation and Pastores dabo vobis* underscore the importance of "affective maturity" in the life of the celibate. Carolyn Saarni (2000) articulates a set of eight skills associated with emotional competence that may serve nicely as benchmarks for assessing and fostering affective maturity. They include: awareness of one's emotional state; skill in discerning others' emotions; skill in naming emotions; capacity for sympathy and empathy; skill in adaptively coping with unpleasant emotions; awareness of the relationship between the type/quality of relationship and the immediacy and genuineness of emotional display (i.e. boundaries); and capacity for emotional self-efficacy.

While it would be impossible to list of all the skills helpful to a life of celibate chastity, a few others come to mind as particularly important: a healthy and regular prayer life; insight into the effects of one's emotions on behavior; capacity for vulnerability in relationships; impulse control; ability to delay gratification; capacity to deal with loneliness; social problem-solving skills; and the ability to rely on close relationships for support and personal accountability.

The work of fostering skills for celibacy happens across a variety of settings. Lectures, readings and workshops

are important for imparting basic information. Opportunities for sharing experiences and even practicing emotional and social problem-solving skills via case-studies or scenarios can translate ideas into the experiential realm. Spiritual direction, counseling, the daily dynamics of relationships within community, and even the occasional challenges to celibate living provide endless and important opportunities for growth.

With respect to the limitations that one brings to the celibate experience, these often look like the absence of those characteristics listed in the skills section. Here the celibacy formation program must aim at helping the candidate grow in awareness of his or her limitations, then proceed to assist the candidate in remediating these when possible, and finally evaluating how to weigh these limitations in the final decision as to whether to take a life-long vow of celibate chastity.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have outlined a model or framework for celibacy formation which emphasizes celibacy as a lived experience and which attempts to leave room for individual differences and a trajectory of growth over the course of formation and the rest of a celibate's lifetime. A primary goal has been to articulate a model that is, on the one hand, broad enough to be applied to formation settings in both seminaries and religious communities, and specific enough to give formation staff clear direction in planning their work in celibacy formation. While the primary emphasis has been on the utility of this model for initial formation, there are clear applications of the framework for screening and ongoing formation as well.

Any program for celibacy formation should be considered a work in progress—one that improves as a result of regular program evaluation and the sharing of ideas with other professionals who do the work of celibacy formation in the church. One of the goals in writing up this model has been to initiate a collaborate research program between Saint Meinrad Archabbey and Seminary and Saint Luke Institute, aimed at

identifying best practices in celibacy formation. We expect this research project to culminate in a national conference for vocation and formation personnel on the topic of models of celibacy formation in Fall 2015.

RECOMMENDED READING

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