

# The vow of celibacy in real life

By Sister Julia Walsh F.S.P.A., Father Kevin Zobel C.Ss.R., and Sister Romina Sapinoso S.C.

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## My body freely given to God

*By Sister Julia Walsh, F.S.P.A.*

AS A MODERN FRANCISCAN SISTER who has professed the vow of celibacy, I have freely chosen to give God my whole self, including my body. It is a call and a choice that causes me to give my body to God. Even though I serve as a minister and companion to those who are discerning their vocation, the concept of call remains a mystery to me. How can I define and explain the modern call to celibacy? For me, the call is a wispy and soft summons at times; at other times the call is an urgent insistence, like an eruption within my heart.

When I was very young—before I could read or write—I encountered God’s mystery and felt a profound sense of wonder and awe. From then on, my heart and mind were captured by the power of God. I was formed by my desire to know, love and please the Holy Mystery; my desire to align my life with Christ has influenced even more than the path I walk each day. My identity and my imagination have been propelled into possibility by the Divine.

Along the way, I came to know myself and understand that I was unique, different. As a child, I felt confusion and frustration as I discovered that others didn’t have the same type of faith and focus on God as I did. Later, it was a lonely struggle to be a teen who wanted to avoid trouble, perhaps only because I was afraid of how the trouble might hurt my relationship with God. Attending a tiny public school in the hilly farmland of northeast Iowa, this desire to avoid sin and the near occasions of sin made me into an odd adolescent who prayed about purity of heart and body and was rightly labeled boy-crazy by my peers.

I didn’t yet understand that the radical call to celibacy often requires one to be radically different from others. Celibates must be counterculturally available for Christ, so to point to the wonders of eternity, heaven. Since no spouse can claim us as their own, we must stay open to prayer and service at any time, to promote God’s reign.

Off at college, my desire deepened to foster and protect what was most precious to me—my prayer life and my relationship with God. At the same time, I struggled with the arrival of normal and natural romantic and sexual feelings that seemed to be in conflict with the texture of my nature and my attraction toward spiritual things. I wanted to date. I dreamed of being a mother and wife. Yet, a desire to protect my prayer life guided me to a graced clarity and understanding that the vocation of Catholic sisterhood could offer the best container for my spirit to grow and develop and enable a particular response to the lure of God’s love. I was hearing a call.

I entered the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration just a couple years after college, at age 24. As my idealism met reality, I came to a deeper understanding of the cost of my choice. I had to pay a lot to respond to the call. I knew that being a Catholic sister would be complicated and challenging. I knew I’d continue to fall in love; I knew I loved God most and was meant to give God my whole self. I knew that life without a husband or children could be lonely; I knew that life in community would be life-giving and meaningful.

Each stage and season of formation and development brings its own struggles, yet I persist. I persist because the freedom and joy are not dimmed by the challenges I experience. I persist because I am committed to my choice. I persist because I remain confident of the call. And still, I continue to contend with tensions.

I dreamed of pregnancy and babies in my 20s. Now that I am in my 40s, I have desires to tend to a home, a family. I imagine that as I age, I’ll seek evidence that I am leaving a legacy. I imagine I might wonder about being without children of my own. Certain struggles remain constant: longings for partnership and intimacy; desire to support and accompany those younger than me; an urge to share and contribute to the formation of life, goodness, and beauty.

I am grateful to have learned that, with God, I can co-create these things. I do this in many ways, including by hosting



*Sister Julia Walsh, F.S.P.A. Photo courtesy of MessyJesusBusiness.com*

Once, while attending an exercise class, I was asked to introduce myself to a partner. I said what I typically do: "I am a Franciscan Sister." My partner nodded politely, but then admitted she didn't understand. We talked for a few minutes, and I learned that she was completely detached from religion and unaware of religious life. As society becomes increasingly secularized, I will continue to find myself in conversations where my identity is not understood.

I accept it now: people within and outside the Catholic Church have assumptions and misunderstandings about the vow of celibacy and about me. I'm not called to counter the misjudgments, but I am called to reveal Christ's goodness and love by way of my life. Although I professed celibacy publicly and have offered myself to God freely for the sake of the church and the general public, I can't expect that others will understand.

They cannot understand; many of my reasons for remaining within the complex and sacred tension of vowed celibacy are private. Reasons for commitment ought to be private and personal for each celibate, truly, as our commitment is grounded in the deep love and intimacy we share with Christ. In this sacred tension, celibacy intersects with the purity and emptiness of poverty; I detach and let go and remain free from clinging to possessions, all so that more Mystery can be shared. Yes, to be a consecrated celibate is a public and private commitment for God, for others, from me—the tension of being misunderstood and of my conflicting natural desires persists.

Ultimately I know my vow of celibacy as a faith offering, one that embraces the tensions of living as a creative and sexual being within this vocation. In the midst of the tensions that coexist with this choice, I continue to choose my vocation because I am given to God. I belong to God.

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## Sacrifice, discipline, creative possibility

By Father Kevin Zubel, C.Ss.R.



Father Kevin Zubel, C.Ss.R. Photo courtesy of the Redemptorists, Denver Province

RECENTLY WHILE VISITING MY HOMETOWN of Austin, Texas I met up with a close friend and former coworker for a long walk followed by caffeine-fueled conversation at a downtown café. The talk quickly turned to memories of the earliest days of our friendship when, fresh out of graduate school, we worked together as accountants at the local office of a global professional services firm. In the intervening years, both of us moved on from crunching numbers: she to family counseling and I to religious life as a Redemptorist missionary.

As we laughed over tales of demanding clients and interoffice drama, we began to take note of a recurring theme we lacked the maturity to recognize when we were in our 20s: how sexuality permeated the professional world we lived in during our years in client service. My friend and I remarked on how the strategic use of sexuality, whether conscious or not, played into the power dynamics of Austin's office culture during its rapid growth in the early 2000s. This was not the old cliché of sleeping one's way to the top, but a subtle role subversion in which newer hires, radiating a sexual self-confidence, asserted a charismatic authority over even the most senior members of the companies we served. Most of our clients were high-tech startups, and so there was a constant scramble for talent and funding. This filled the city with recruiters and promoters who used their sexuality to capture attention and move within high-flying social and corporate circles. Those in professional service firms also quickly learned which client personnel were physically attracted to certain staffers and took this into account when scheduling projects.

Although I am still young in religious life, I can look back on these earlier experiences and recognize the impact of human sexuality on daily life beyond the question of relationships and intimacy. When I reflect today on the vow of celibacy, my idea of the vowed life extends beyond thoughts on what is sacrificed for the sake of embracing a vocation to religious life. For me, the vow of celibacy literally embodies the call to live my sexuality in a way that is creative, relational, and free for the service of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In outlining the importance of the vow of celibate chastity, our Redemptorist Constitutions and Statutes state, "Those to whom the Father has given this gift of grace, are so captivated by what the kingdom of God offers them, that only by choosing this religious celibacy can they respond personally and fully to God's love for them" (Cons. 59). Of course, the discipline and self-denial implicit in the vow of celibacy bear a real emotional cost. All religious know that, on the day of our vows, there's no magic switch that makes the mirrors go dark and turns the people around us into shapeless, formless beings. As a celibate I still feel drawn to connect with people, to feel lovable, and there are moments of great longing for intimacy. As I travel further into my 40s, the struggle and sadness of the self-denial involved in the vow of celibacy grow

kitchen table. I recognize the need to mourn the cost of my freewill denial of the human right to an intimate relationship that would unite me, in Christ, to a wife with whom I might have raised a family and shared the joys and struggles of daily life.

However, as with other forms of grief, consolation dawns the moment I accept the healing and empowering grace of the Holy Spirit, who is always guiding us to fullness of life. Jesus tells us that “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (John 12:24). I don’t believe that Christian discipleship, whether in religious vows, marriage, or single life, demands the discipline of celibacy as sacrifice or demonstration of commitment for its own end. We are a people of Resurrection, so for us, every death is the seed for the life of something new.

Even in my short time as a religious, I see that the creative possibilities for promoting healing, renewal, and reconciliation within interpersonal relationships becomes the “something new” that is cultivated by the vow of celibacy. My community’s constitutions note that celibacy, “like marriage, though in a different way ... signifies and embodies the love of Christ and his Church” (Cons. 57), and it is in the bond between Christ and his church where we find our greatest guide for how to love others in a spirit of gospel sexuality.

Meditating on the life of Jesus of Nazareth, I see a person who relates to others, both male and female, in a way that integrates human touch with a gift of self. To heal and animate both body and spirit, Jesus will touch the untouchable, gather children into his arms, and wash the feet of his disciples. In his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus supersedes the taboos of his society not only to put the woman at ease in his presence but to embrace her right to be genuinely and assertively herself. In the intimate moments between Jesus and those in need of healing, we see none of the manipulation through use of sexuality that my friend and I witnessed in our earlier professional careers.

Human sexuality holds tremendous potential for good and also for violence, domination, and division. Jesus Christ restores this power to its original purpose of building bonds, affirming dignity, and creating new life in abundance. To me, the vow of celibacy frees me and all religious to live this gospel sexuality as embodied and revealed in Christ. Our membership in the Body of Christ calls us to be physically present to one another in ways that heal, strengthen, and unite us.

The truth of this was revealed in the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic when we began to see physical closeness as a potential danger mitigated through safety measures such as social distancing and masking. When I contracted COVID-19, I grappled with the terrifying and heartbreaking reality that my very breath put others at risk. With human contact limited by necessity, we Catholics discovered how essential physical touch and presence are to the sacramental life. When I was restricted to offering prayers for the dying through a phone or tablet, and unable to anoint the sick by touch or laying on of hands, I felt that these sacramental moments, though retaining the full action of God’s grace, nevertheless lost much of their power of encounter. Never again will I take for granted the gift of the sacraments as moments in which Christ unites us to himself by uniting us physically, in time and space, with one another. The sacramental life binds us as the Body of Christ as the lived ideal of gospel sexuality.

I pray that God will sustain me in my vow of celibacy, giving me the courage and the wisdom not only to cultivate the necessary discipline and spirit of denial, but to strengthen me to follow the example of Jesus Christ in embracing the healing and empowering potential of gospel sexuality. Living in a society that urges us to curate virtual identities, all of us—especially our youth—confront impossible aesthetic ideals that make us feel ashamed of our bodies and identities. Racism, classism, and sexism all persist in ways that reveal the continuing struggle against forces that assault human sexuality for profit or for power.

By saying “I do” to the vow of celibacy, I am asking the Holy Spirit to help my confreres and me to offer a counter witness to these dehumanizing forces and, by our example, to help other Christian disciples to follow faithfully the example of our Redeemer, for whom no one was untouchable or unworthy of love.

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## Celibate, fully human, fully alive

*By Sister Romina S. Sapinoso, S.C.*

IF YOU FELL IN LOVE at this time in your religious life, is there someone you would be able to talk to about it? This was my question to a small group in the Life Commitment Program I took part in some time ago. We were all men and women religious, preparing for perpetual vows in our respective congregations. As we talked about the vow of celibacy, a memory came back to me of falling in love while already in temporary vows as a sister. I remembered the flip-flopping, crazy energy of the early stages of attraction wreaking havoc on my insides.

“You look beautiful! And glowing,” one of my sisters who hadn’t seen me for several months told me. I blushed, thankful that my dark complexion didn’t display red on my cheeks. I was a little surprised that what I was feeling inside was so

I had been prepped for this experience during inter-congregational novitiate sessions on healthy sexuality. It was bound to happen, presenters said. It wasn't a matter of if we fall in love but when we fall in love, they told us. Falling in love was a given. And it happened to me after I had left the dating world and moved into a world of poverty, celibacy, and obedience.

Thankfully, I was in a healthy community situation with at least one trusted sister I could confide in. I had the awareness to recognize what was happening, as well as the grace to allow myself space for the crazy emotions of what I knew was a normal part of my sexuality.

Deep down, we all long for connection. It is who we are as human beings. We desire to be seen, held, and loved by another in a special kind of way. Father Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I. talks about sexuality as, "a beautiful, good, extremely powerful sacred energy given us by God and experienced in every cell of our being as an irrepressible urge to overcome our incompleteness, to move toward unity and consummation with that which is beyond us." As much as I love my life as a religious woman, I feel my incompleteness on some days more than others. It shows its need to be filled by the incredible energy I feel drawing me to the person I'm infatuated with, just as a hummingbird is drawn to sugar water. Taking a vow of celibacy doesn't mean I'm immune to these situations and feelings.

Before I refined my understanding of the vow of celibacy, I could see myself running away, putting as much distance as possible between myself and the person I was attracted to. Repression would have been the immediate response of my less mature self. Sticking around would have been too scary and risky. Thankfully, with opportunities for spiritual and emotional growth, God's endless grace has bettered this part of me over the years. With this foundation—and my sisters' modeling of healthy, celibate friendships in community—I could respond in integration instead of by fleeing or giving in.

In contrast to fleeing, living a healthy vow of celibacy means embracing and seeking deep, intimate connections with others. This is vital in any vocation, including religious life. But this means we also risk falling in love at some point. Saint Irenaeus says that what brings about the glory of God is each of us, fully human, fully alive. Falling in love is certainly part of that whole human experience. When it happens, the hope is that we are grounded enough to proceed with discernment, honesty, and compassion for ourselves and those we fall in love with, understanding that this is what it means to live as loving people, fully embracing life. We remind ourselves that our relationships are held and wrapped in God, who alone fulfills our deepest desires for intimacy. The practices of self-work, cultivation of real friendships and accountability in community, and the discipline of prayer enable me to choose to honor this vow each day and season of my life.

It's still not easy, but I am aware now that running away or closing myself up to everyone to avoid temptation doesn't serve celibacy's purpose because then I also shut out all other possibilities of deep, loving, celibate friendships as well. And what is life without love and connection?

For those of us in religious life, falling in love comes with the territory of loving widely, but so does rising above its exclusivity. Our Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati constitution says, "As daughters of Elizabeth Seton, we value friendship. We take care to foster relationships that are loving and freeing while avoiding those which are confining and exclusive. During the inevitable moments of loneliness, we seek to learn how better to give and accept love."

There is freedom in embracing the fact that religious life is not immune to loneliness and still saying yes to it—and in realizing that the cure to this loneliness doesn't only reside in finally being in exclusive love with someone we are drawn to.

When we live celibacy in an integrated way, we can move into a more inclusive love. The exhilarating, incredible passions of falling in love can be offered and joined with the Source of our essence and being. Imagine that power. When given to God, this energy becomes formidable in service to our mission—to stand with those on the margins, fight injustice, and show compassion to the broken. This is easier said than done, but with a balance in other aspects of our lives, it is so possible and so fruitful. Celibate living has always been about finding my way back to the center, into that space of equilibrium and balance of knowing whose I really am. It starts with recognizing when I seek affirmation outside and cling to the compelling energy of infatuation. It is having the grace to acknowledge it, and consciously let it settle within me instead of rushing to get rid of it. Returning to the center means finding joy and beauty again in regular, everyday things, such as a beautiful sunset or a cool breeze on a morning walk. It is soaking in a feeling of profound love and contentment after the exciting waves of emotion from a new attraction calm down. When I return to the center, I can recognize that I truly, deeply love my religious life and that I am also truly and deeply loved.

I've learned that the most beautiful celibate people are the ones courageous enough to love despite the possibility of getting hurt. Relationships have the potential to break us open and reveal what's inside. That is always quite terrifying. But when we get past this, we also open ourselves to a more immense, wider Love. Truly loving celibates say yes to this, time and time again, in vulnerability and freedom. They see the bigger picture: the vow of celibacy is about God's infinite love for



Sister Romina S. Sapinoso, S.C. Photo courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati



In the end, the vow of celibacy is a way to live Jesus' vision of a full life: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). For me, this vow has been a gift that seamlessly weaves the fabric of my life into a beautiful tapestry of friendship, grace, and connections under the encompassing shelter of God's abiding love.

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