

A Biblical Spirituality of Celibacy

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At the outset I want to thank Ted Keating, SM and the Executive Committee of the Conference of the Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) for inviting me to give this presentation. It is an honor and a privilege, especially to work with such highly qualified individuals as those on the program who have preceded me. I believe that you will see that what I have to say is compatible with their various approaches, even though my own topic is limited in scope.

I will proceed in four stages. In the first stage I will provide some introductory comments and issue a few cautions to draw attention to the limits of my presentation. The second stage will evaluate the passages in the Bible that are typically referred to when discussing celibacy. This will include a negative assessment as well as a positive one, noting that some passages, in fact, do not pertain to celibacy. The third stage will outline what I consider to be basic elements of a biblical spirituality of celibacy. The fact that the Bible has very little to say about celibacy explicitly does not mean that there is no biblical basis for it. The final stage will contain a brief conclusion that leads into a time for questions, observations and discussion.

I. Introduction and Cautions

Most of you know that we Sulpicians work in initial and ongoing formation of priests. Recently, while reviewing our own recruitment strategy, we sponsored a short anonymous survey of priests from around the country to help give us data on priests' concerns. The response was quite good. A topic that arose was certainly celibacy. One response, in particular, sticks in my mind. This priest said in words to this effect, "Celibacy is a joke. No one can live it. The only reason we have it is for purely economic reasons." While this attitude might be extreme, I don't think anyone can argue that celibacy is not a hot topic.

As I prepared for my presentation, I thought it would be interesting to see what Bible dictionaries have to say about celibacy. I began with one of the foremost Bible dictionaries of the twentieth century, the formidable multi-volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. It is a standard in the field and very helpful. To my surprise, here was the complete entry under the topic of celibacy: "Celibacy. Votive abstention from marriage and sexual relations—unknown unless alluded to in Matthew 19:12."¹ A remarkable entry, isn't it. If that were all that could be said, we could all go home early. Even granting a traditional Protestant approach to the topic of celibacy, dating from the time of Martin Luther and the 16th century Reformers, I think this perspective is too limited.

I must, however, place my presentation in its proper context. Already in this workshop we have examined sociological, psychological, theological, and anthropological data with regard to formation in celibacy. My own goal is more limited. I want to examine the question of whether the Bible gives any firm foundation to celibacy, and if so, what its parameters might be. Limited as I believe they are, I think we can nonetheless find some biblical warrants for celibacy that avoid the pitfall of proof-texting. To that end I will not quote important official Church documents on this topic or seek out references in our broader Catholic tradition. Rather, I want to take the Bible on its own terms first to see what we can discover.

In light of my project, I also issue four cautionary remarks.

1) Our Catholic approach to sacred scripture is not entirely consonant with the approach of most of the Protestant tradition, and in particular, the fundamentalist approach to the Bible. Even if the Bible had not one word to say about celibacy that does not mean that we would think it illegitimate for the Church to institute it. As Vatican Council II asserts, Catholics acknowledge scripture and tradition both as sources of divine revelation. These are not merely two separate entities, but interrelated realities in a complex relationship in which one interprets and influences the other. Not everything we Catholics believe needs to be found literally in scripture, although I admit we have had our own share of proof-texting from the Bible throughout our history. (For further treatment of this topic, I refer you to my book on biblical fundamentalism.²)

2) Another caution is that not every passage in the Bible is self-evident. That fact is that some passages are very obscure and difficult to interpret. They can confound even the experts. Thus we should not expect in every case a clear-cut interpretation about what any given passage might actually have meant or means for us.

3) Since some of this material was handled before, I will not be going into any detail about distinctions that should be made when discussing celibacy. Celibacy is not chastity, is not virginity, is not merely continence. I recently read an article in a magazine in which an Eastern rite priest argued strongly that all baptized Christians are called to celibacy! Frankly, I think he made a fundamental error that many have made before; he confused celibacy and chastity. All are called to chastity, including married couples. But not all are called to celibacy. For our purposes, celibacy is the voluntary foregoing of a marital relationship and the genital expression of one's sexual identity for altruistic reasons. I will not get into further distinctions that might lead us down other roads.

4) If by celibacy, we mean mandatory, obligatory celibacy tied to the Roman Catholic priesthood (in the tradition of the West, obviously, since Eastern rite priests are permitted to marry and have children), then we must admit immediately that the Bible is indeed silent on the topic.³ First of all, the only priesthood mentioned in the New Testament is that of Jesus, in the Letter to the Hebrews. There is certainly no mention of celibacy there, and it is not tied to priesthood. But I would suggest that celibacy, from a biblical perspective, is actually a broader concept than that identified with the Church's current practice of a celibate priesthood. In fact, the Church's practice has ancient roots and evolved historically for complex reasons unrelated to the biblical perspective, but that again is another topic that would lead us astray.⁴

5) Finally, as other contemporary figures have mentioned, even if the Church decided to change the current practice of celibacy for diocesan priests, the practice would still remain an essential part of religious identity. In particular, I would note Canice Connors, OFM Conv.'s letter last year to the CMSM membership in which this was stated so well. Celibacy is part of the warp and woof of religious life. It is consonant with a communal perspective and an asceticism that belongs, by definition, to religious commitment, whether of religious priests, brothers or sisters. Since you are all religious leaders or formators, I assume that you recognize and accept this perspective.

Now with these comments behind us, let's move on to some specific biblical data.

II. Biblical Passages to Consider

The biblical data are limited, but I will divide this section into two parts. The first will briefly note three passages that are sometimes (wrongly) considered to have something to say about celibacy. Then we will turn our attention to two passages that I think actually do pertain to celibacy.

We will not be able to read the passages in their entirety in the interests of time, but we will pay attention to their context and the most crucial phrases.

A) Passages Not Pertaining to Celibacy

1) The first passage is 1 Timothy 4:1-3. You will recall that is likely a Deutero-Pauline letter written at a later time than Paul, perhaps by a disciple. The style of the letter is that of a senior apostle (Paul) writing to his younger colleague (Timothy) to give him advice about his ministry. The passage in question speaks of some problems in the community with false ascetical practices that Paul warns against. The most pertinent words for our purposes are: "They forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good...."

It is not clear who "they" are, but what is clear is that these opponents are teaching a false asceticism that is contrary to the gospel Paul preached. (Indeed, this was sometimes a problem in the undisputed letters of Paul also. See my forthcoming book on Paul.⁵) Most importantly, these frauds are prohibiting marriage and the consumption of certain foods on the basis of some false assumptions about what is or is not permissible for those who follow the gospel. Whatever the forbidding of marriage is about, it is not celibacy. Rather, it more likely pertains to some extreme distaste for marriage on the grounds of sexual prudishness or perhaps pertaining to eschatological expectations. Whatever the actual circumstances, this passage does not address celibacy.

2) A second passage is Luke 20:34-36. The most pertinent words for our inquiry are: "Jesus said to them, 'The children of this age marry and remarry; but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage'" (vv. 34-35). The context of the passage is important (vv. 27-40). Certain Sadducees, who denied the belief in the general resurrection of the dead accepted by the Pharisees, are trying to trap Jesus by asking a question about a woman who had married multiple times in this life. When she died and finally went to heaven, they ask Jesus, whose wife would she be?

In essence, Jesus sidesteps the question of marriage in favor of asserting that the life after resurrection does not mirror this earthly life at all. There is no institution of marriage in heaven. His commendation of those who do not marry is not about celibates in this life but about those who will attain

the resurrected life in the kingdom to come. The issue, as the context indicates, is actually about the resurrection of the dead, not marriage or celibacy. Only by analogy could one say that this passage might suggest that celibacy is a foretaste of the eschaton, an understanding that does develop in later theology.

3) A third passage is Revelation 14:1-5. (Note, by the way, that the book is called in the singular "Revelation," not "Revelations." It is not about a series of revelations but one grand revelation of God's ultimate victory over evil.) This passage concerns the 144,000 companions of "the Lamb" who are saved and found worthy of God's kingdom. The most pertinent words for us are, speaking of these saved ones: "These are they who were not defiled with women; they are virgins and these are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (v. 4). Again, this is not about celibacy. As verse 5 clearly points out, the reason these limited number of chosen ones (not to be taken as a literal but symbolic number, relating to the traditional, historical tribes of Israel) are saved is not because of literal virginity but having "no deceit on their lips" and being "unblemished." This is symbolic language for idolatry, the traditional sin that plagued Israel throughout its history. (Keep in mind the Old Testament connection of idolatry with sexual promiscuity, e.g., Exodus 32:1-6; Hosea 4:13-14.) They are the "first fruits of the human race" who are "ransomed" to be with God and the Lamb (i.e., the victorious Christ) [v. 5]. The passage, then, has nothing to do with celibacy but with remaining righteous and steadfast in the face of persecution. Those who do not succumb to idolatry will be rewarded with life in the kingdom of the Lamb.

Now, if these three passages are not pertinent to our inquiry, I believe there are two passages that are. We turn to them now.

B) Passages Pertaining to Celibacy

1) The first passage is found in a Gospel, the famous passage about eunuchs, Matthew 19:3-12. The passage is primarily about marriage and divorce, a hot topic in Jesus' day. Some Pharisees try to trap Jesus, perhaps by getting him to align himself with the liberal school of the day that permitted a man to divorce his wife for almost any reason, or the more conservative school that indicated there should be serious reasons for divorce. Judaism tended to frown upon multiple divorces, but recognized instances in which marriages fell apart. Surprisingly, Jesus aligns himself to neither school. Instead he prohibits divorce of any kind. One of the more secure teachings of the so-called "historical Jesus" was that he prohibited divorce. That was extraordinary in his day. Matthew's community (or the evangelist himself) struggled with this, since the famous exception clause ("unless the marriage is unlawful," v. 9) is slipped into this passage. I am sorry that we cannot linger on the complexities of this entire passage. Many books have been written about it, and this is not the place to rehearse them. Our goal is to examine the section on eunuchs rather than to discuss marriage and divorce.

The most noticeable thing after Jesus speaks his mind is the reaction of the disciples. They declare incredulously, "If that is the case of a man with his wife, then it is better not to marry" (v. 10). In other words, marriage sounds too complicated! We might as well stay single and save ourselves a lot of trouble. (After what I have seen of many marriages, I can sympathize with the perspective. For any celibate priest or brother who thinks marriage is the "silver bullet" or nirvana, he should take a good look at the struggles of married couples. For instance, they sometimes experience loneliness as deeply as anyone else.) To this objection (or is it abject resignation?), however, Jesus responds with the words most important for our context: "Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom it is granted. Some are eunuchs from birth; some were made so by others, some because they have become eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it." (vv. 11-12, my translation).

Let me point out a number of essential details about this passage that confirm, in my judgment, that it does indeed concern celibacy.

a) Notice that Jesus calls for a higher standard throughout the passage. Married couples are called to observe their marital obligations permanently. A small number of utterly dedicated "eunuchs" are called to forego marriage and genital relationships for a higher purpose also, the kingdom.

b) The image of the eunuch, unflattering though it may be, has two sides to it. Clearly it implies that sexual urges have been checked. One "neuters" or "has neutered" naturally or forcibly one of the strongest urges of the human race, sex. This also ironically frees one for other things. The image of the eunuch has a positive side to it. One thinks, for instance, the high places some eunuchs held historically in the retinue of kings and emperors. They were often men of high rank and great influence. In some contexts they were charged with guarding a king's most sacred possessions, his harem. There is, then, a type of generativity that can be associated with the image (as in Paul Philibert OP's theological presentation this morning that emphasized that celibacy does not negate but embraces generativity).

c) Nowhere does the passage denigrate sexuality or marriage. In fact, Jesus goes out of his way to hark back to the ideals of Genesis 2, which shows God establishing marriage as a sacred institution (Matt 19:4-6). Jesus is not upholding celibacy (the eunuch image) as better than marriage.

d) Jesus says that being (becoming) a eunuch is not for everyone. It is quite restricted.

e) It involves free choice. One must accept this call.

f) It is also a gift ("to whom it is given"). For Matthew, the passive voice here evokes God as the source of the gift. God grants celibacy to some, and they are free to embrace it.

g) This free choice involves a higher purpose, "for the sake of the kingdom." In Matthew's judgment, all disciples are called to put the kingdom first, but a small number of disciples can choose celibacy as a means of expressing utter devotion to the kingdom.

In short, this passage contains several elements that provide a good spiritual foundation for celibacy properly understood in its context.

2) The second passage is 1 Corinthians 7. It is quite long, and we cannot be detained by an extensive look at it. We will concentrate on the essential verses that address our topic (vv. 6-9). It is interesting that, as in the case of the Matthean passage above, this one addresses celibacy in the context of marriage and divorce. The entire chapter speaks to sexual issues that the Corinthians have asked Paul to address. He does so both with an eye to what Jesus taught and to his own perspective that he freely shares.

After giving married Corinthians advice to give themselves to their spouses freely, and adding that it might be good for purposes of prayer to abstain from sexual relations once in awhile—and by mutual agreement, goes on to add the lines that are most applicable to our discussion. "Indeed, I wish everyone to be as I am, but each has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. Now to the unmarried and to widows I say: it is a good thing for them to remain as they are, as I do, but if they cannot exercise self-control they should marry, for it is better to marry than to be on fire." Isn't Paul earthy? He recognizes the real potent force of sexual desire, but he also calls people to be prudent and exercise self-control. Paul is ever the realist and advises those who cannot hold themselves in check to embrace marriage.

Now several observations are pertinent with regard to celibacy.

a) Note that Paul nowhere condemns sexual relations within marriage, nor does he exalt celibacy over and above marriage. They are separate ways, different, but both from God.

b) A real question is what Paul means by "as I am." Is he single and never married? Is he a widower who now abstains from remarriage, as some scholars maintain? It was unusual in Judaism for men not to be married, but since Paul was fairly young at his conversion, perhaps he never married. Personally, I think the evidence favors that Paul was never married. There is no direct evidence in Scripture or elsewhere that he was married.

c) But why would he exhort people to imitate him in this choice of a non-married state if he recognizes that marriage is a legitimate gift of God? Paul's reasons are not because celibacy is better, a higher calling, or allows one freedom to do ministry. Rather, the context of 1 Corinthians 7 indicates that Paul's eschatological expectations about the coming of God's kingdom are powerfully present. He wants everyone to remain as they are because Jesus' return is around the corner, so to speak. He does not want them to change their lives because change can increase their anxiety. Thus Paul is not exhorting people to celibacy as such but to following one's individual gift (Greek *charisma*), which he will talk at length about in later chapters (1 Corinthians 11-12). Consequently, we can say that for Paul celibacy, rare though it might have been in his day, is a valued gift from God given to some so that they can fully devote themselves to the proclamation of the gospel.

To the above material, I want to point out something else that is often overlooked. Celibacy is not unique to Christianity. Judaism, in fact, exhibits some awareness of the practice of voluntarily refraining from marriage and sexual relations for other purposes. Jeremiah, the famous seventh-century BC prophet, is the most prominent example. God instructs him that he is to remain unmarried precisely so that his life can be a witness to Judah about their infidelity (Jeremiah 16:1-2). Through Jeremiah God will bring punishment and barrenness on this stubborn people. But paradoxically, Jeremiah's celibacy is also intended to call the people back to fidelity with God. His celibacy is intended to bear another kind of fruit.

Other examples of voluntary sexual abstinence include the ban on sex for warriors prior to entering battle (cf. 1 Samuel 21:4-6), sexual abstinence in conjunction with divine revelation (Exodus 19:15), the taking of life-long Nazarite vows to avoid wine, leave one's hair uncut, and abstain from sex in order to be utterly dedicated to God (cf. Judges 13:5-7; 16:17; cf. Num 6:2). Some two centuries before Jesus, one group of Jews, the Essenes, went into the desert near the Dead Sea and invoked celibacy as a basic rule for their community. The Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran most likely bear witness to this phenomenon, by which adherents felt they could preserve authentic Judaism while awaiting the eschatological battle that would lead to God's ultimate victory over evil. In all these and other instances (e.g., certain pagan practices and Hellenistic philosophies in New Testament times) celibacy is seen as

voluntary and an ascetical practice that could have other benefits. Celibacy was usually viewed as temporary practice rather than permanent.

Now that we have examined the biblical background, I will conclude with some observations about a spirituality of celibacy.

III. Basic Elements for a Biblical Spirituality of Celibacy

Time constraints will force me to limit my observations here and only to suggest the main outlines of the direction I would take. My hope is that I will be able to develop this further in other settings.

I believe that we should start by delineating five areas that are crucial to developing a spirituality of celibacy, but first I want to recall some of the learnings from the biblical data. I have four observations.

1) It is important to note that Jesus, the one to whom we trace our beginnings as Christians, was himself celibate. There is no scriptural evidence that he was ever married. To the contrary, his life seems to have been devoted entirely to God. Absolute fealty to God is uppermost, and abandoning all human endeavors to be utterly devoted to his heavenly Father is quintessential. Furthermore, his foremost apostle Paul (who never met Jesus in the flesh but only as risen Lord) remained celibate. Celibacy has some strong biblical warrants in Jesus and Paul. One can hardly overlook the fact that these two monumental figures loom large at the very beginning of Christianity.

2) While the Bible does not explicitly connect celibacy with priesthood, the biblical perspective shows that celibacy is perfectly consonant with it. Indeed, the Bible shows that celibacy is well suited to certain individuals, at certain times and in certain circumstances, precisely because it aids in the specific mission to which God calls them. The Roman Catholic priesthood, as it has evolved over time, is one of those special realities. For religious priests, in particular, celibacy is part and parcel of what it means to oneself freely to a community to give witness to a prophetic ministry of utter devotion to God.

3) The biblical data suggest that celibacy is countercultural and highly restricted. It is not and has never been intended for everyone. It is a unique gift from God that requires free acceptance of it. If it goes against the grains of a given culture (ours is clearly no exception!), then that is part of its heritage. Celibacy calls one to look elsewhere for a deeper purpose and goal in life. Celibacy calls one to look beyond. Importantly, celibacy also offers no guarantees. It creates the possibility of closeness with God, of single-minded devotion to God's kingdom, of becoming truly an *alter Christus* in a special way, but it does not guarantee it. In fact, our contemporary situation shows how far removed from the ideal those who embrace celibacy can actually be. Furthermore, if celibates are expected to help lead others see this deeper reality of God's reign, then they must experience it for themselves, and this is part of the real challenge of this way of life.

4) Finally, I would note that celibacy is not a gift that can function alone. It must be hinged to some other values that, in fact, are tied explicitly to religious life in the evangelical counsels. I mean values such as prayer, developing a closeness to God and to Christ, obedience to transcendent values and to higher authorities, and simplicity of life (poverty). Celibacy cannot be sustained on its own. Like any good garden, it needs to be watered and fertilized to produce.

What, then, can constitute the biblical underpinnings of celibacy in our day? I point to five aspects of the biblical perspective where we ought to look: theological, Christological, pneumatological, eschatological, and ecclesial. The first three are consciously grouped successively because they constitute a Trinitarian approach that should be foundational in Christian life, especially the religious life and the priesthood. The Trinity is the primary model of relationship. The threefold Godhead is the quintessential "family," the essence of self-donation and friendship to which all are called but which should especially be a hallmark of celibate life.

A) The theological foundation of celibacy is to be located in utter devotion to God and God's kingdom or rule. Celibates must make God the absolute in their lives.

B) The Christological foundation of celibacy is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ himself. Not only is he the prime model of celibacy by the witness of his life, public ministry, and death, but he is also the one whom celibates strive to incarnate. Becoming an *alter Christus*, another Christ, is at the very heart of celibate life. In word and deed, we are called to imitation of Christ, perfectly and without reservation. This implies **befriending Christ, becoming intimate with him in prayer, the sacraments, and the Word of God**. Indeed, so transforming should this Christological power be that we should be able to cry out with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Gal 2:19-20).

C) The pneumatological foundation is rooted in the Holy Spirit. According to Paul, celibacy is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the enabler, the font of our ability to live the celibate life. As Paul

Philibert reminded us earlier today, celibacy means becoming “supple in the Spirit,” able to bend and adapt and be transformed by the breath of God. Celibacy cannot be lived alone apart from the Spirit.

D) The eschatological foundation brings us back to a prophetic dimension of celibacy that is also consonant with religious life. **Celibacy** is primarily intended to be a symbol. It is liminal and it calls us to live “on the edge.” It is profoundly countercultural and viewed by many as out of step, when in reality, it **is intended to call us to a more transcendent awareness that there is much more to life than we experience here and now.** Prophets embrace a countercultural attitude that is intended to spark in people the hint that God is about more than success, power, money, prestige and the like, measured in this world’s terms. Celibacy can only thrive if it is viewed with an eye to the future, the ultimate future of God’s eschatological victory over evil, sin and death.

E) Finally, there is an ecclesial dimension to celibacy that is also rooted in Scripture. Celibacy is an institution of the Church. From one angle it is appropriate to say that celibates do, in practice, become spouses of the Church. The Scriptures note that marriage is an analogy for the love between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5), and the Church has now adopted this in relation to the celibate priesthood.⁶ This has become particularly prominent in the work of Pope John Paul II.⁷ Nonetheless, I must point out that nowhere is it developed in Scripture, especially in relation to the priesthood. It is intended rather as an analogy, a symbol. As such, it has utility but also limitations. As with so many analogies, if one carries it to extremes or interprets it too literally, it can dissolve before our very eyes. More important is to be reminded that celibates relate to the Church, the people of God, in terms of service. There is a freeing aspect to single-minded devotion to ministry. **Celibates choose to make living for others and serving them the priority in their lives.** In this fashion, they are “married” to the Church, the people of God. This is a practical result of a more theological commitment. But we should never allow this to mean that celibacy is a superior way of life. It is not, and the Bible nowhere assesses it thus.

IV. Conclusion

We have now arrived at the chance for questions, comments and discussion. I am quite aware that what we have done this morning is still sketchy and could be further developed. My intention, however, was to provoke some reflection on the connections to the prior presentations and to suggest, in whatever limited a manner, that while the Bible nowhere connects celibacy with ministry or priesthood, it does provide a spiritual vision of what is possible in the celibate life.

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¹ David Noel Freedman et al, Eds. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Vol I; New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 879.

² Ronald D. Witherup, *Biblical Fundamentalism: What Every Catholic Should Know* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

³ This is scarcely a new insight. See, for example, the conclusions of Ignatius Hunt, “Celibacy in Scripture,” in George H. Frein (ed.), *Celibacy: The Necessary Option* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 123-37.

⁴ For a brief but helpful overview of this historical development, see John W. O’Malley, “Some Basics About Celibacy,” *America* 187:13 (Oct. 28, 2002) 7-10.

⁵ Ronald D. Witherup, *101 Questions & Answers on Paul* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2003).

⁶ For an overview, see the treatment of this topic in Thomas McGovern, *Priestly Celibacy Today* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Publishers; Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1998).

⁷ See, for example, the apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* #22 (1992), which grew out of the 1990 Synod of Bishops on Priestly Formation.