

A Journal of  
Catholic Spirituality

# Review

*for religious*

Theology and Life  
Religious Life Models  
Exemplars of Faith  
Sharing Experience

QUARTERLY

68.4

2009

***Review for Religious fosters dialogue with God,  
dialogue with ourselves, and dialogue with one  
another about the holiness we try to live according  
to charisms of Catholic religious life. As Pope  
Paul VI said, our way of being church is  
today the way of dialogue.***

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A Journal of  
Catholic Spirituality

# Review

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## Marriage and Celibacy: Rivals or Complements?

**M**arriage and celibacy are often seen as contraries. Misunderstanding about these two vocations still exists among many people who do not fully understand celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven or the meaning of marriage. They see marriage as contrary to celibacy, totally separated from it, and unable to contribute anything to it. And they understand celibacy as merely a pessimistic, negative rejection of married life and love. They even think celibacy is responsible for many sexual problems. About these matters people raise critical questions such as: Is marriage contrary to celibacy or even a rival? Is marriage a higher and better state than celibacy, or is it the other way around? Does marriage confirm celibacy or devalue it? If marriage confirms celibacy, how does it do so?

On this topic I want to draw some reflections from the messages of Pope John Paul II (collected in *Theology of the Body*), from the critical reflection on celibacy in the Catholic Church written by Aloysius Pieris SJ, and from the experience of St. Thérèse of Lisieux of her vocation to religious life.

### Rival Vocations?

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus places the counsel of celibacy in the discussion of the importance of marriage, when he argues against divorce (Mt 19:3-12). Pope John Paul confirms this, saying, “[From

Matthew’s Gospel, Mt 19:10-12], it can be seen sufficiently clearly that here it is not a question of diminishing the value of matrimony in favor of continence, nor of lessening the value of one in comparison with the other.”<sup>1</sup> “Christ’s words on this point are quite clear. He proposes to his

disciples the ideal of continence and the call to it, not by reason of the inferiority of, or of prejudice against, conjugal union in the body, but only for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

One can, however, argue for St. Paul’s position when he writes, “So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better” (1 Co 7:38). Does this Pauline text not mean that matrimony is good, but celibacy for the kingdom of heaven is better?<sup>3</sup>

*Marriage and celibacy,  
are interrelated. To hurt  
either one by being unfaithful  
in it also hurts the other.*



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We need to comprehend the reason for celibacy in the evangelical counsel. Jesus says, "There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" (Mt 19:12). This is the only reason for the evangelical counsel of celibacy. The reason is not to devalue marriage, but for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. To understand the "difference" between Jesus and Paul as regards celibacy and marriage, John Paul gives us an insight:

In his pronouncement, did Christ perhaps suggest the superiority of continence for the kingdom of heaven to matrimony? Certainly he said that this is an exceptional vocation, not a common one. In addition he affirmed that it is especially important and necessary to the kingdom of heaven. If we understand superiority to matrimony in this sense, we must admit that Christ set it out implicitly. However, he did not express it directly. Only Paul will say of those who choose matrimony that they do "well." About those who are willing to live in voluntary continence, he will say that they do "better" (1 Co 7:38). (*Theology*, p. 275)

The conscious and voluntary renunciation of the conjugal love of marriage and family life by celibate persons is not a devaluation of marriage, but it is a form of self-sacrifice. John Paul explains: "Christ understood the importance of such a sacrifice. . . . He understood the importance of this sacrifice also in relationship to the good which matrimony and the family in themselves constitute due to their divine institution" (*Theology*, p. 274). This sacrifice, however, contains within it a profound understanding that marriage is temporary and that human beings' eternal destiny is the kingdom of heaven, not the world.

Marriage and celibacy, then, are interrelated. To hurt either one by being unfaithful in it also hurts the other.

Think of priests or religious often hearing of divorces in their own families or among the families they serve. They might begin to ask themselves, "Why bother to be faithful to my celibacy? Nobody's faithful." The case is the same when married persons see priests or religious living careless and unfaithful lives. They might ask themselves, "Why bother to remain devoted and faithful to my marriage? Even my leaders in faith live unfaithfully to their holy vocations." The picture is clear. Marriage and celibacy are not rival vocations. They are strongly interrelated. They complement each other.

### Two Complementary Vocations

In addressing spouses living their family lives and priests and religious living their celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, John Paul echoes *Lumen gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (LG §11), by stressing that the family is the domestic church. This understanding also appears in some of his apostolic exhortations. He says to families, "The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason too it can and should be called the domestic church" (*Familiaris consortio*, FC §21). To priests he writes, "The Christian family, which is truly a 'domestic church,' has always offered and continues to offer favorable conditions for the birth of vocations" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, PDV §41). He calls men and women religious "the new family" that is ready to do the will of God (*Vita consecrata*, VC §41).

John Paul, thus, affirms marriage and family life in speaking of the celibate life of priests and religious, and vice versa. Marriage and celibacy are closely connected, although they are different vocations from God. We can compare this to Jesus' words about a tree and its fruits



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(Mt 7:17-18). A good family tree can bear the good fruit of celibacy along with the good marriages of children and grandchildren. What then do these two vocations contribute to each other?

### **Contributions of Marriage to Celibacy**

*Fidelity.* Marriage is a covenant, “the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself” (*FC* §11). As a covenant, marriage depends upon fidelity. When John Paul talks about marriage as the place of self-giving of men and women, he emphasizes fidelity:

The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love, which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator. A person’s freedom, far from being restricted by this fidelity, is secured against every form of subjectivism or relativism and is made a sharer in creative Wisdom. (*FC* §11)

Again, we can mention a tree and its fruits. A lifelong commitment to celibacy is learned from the example of fidelity in marriage and family life. If the family really functions as the domestic church and “a first seminary” (*Optatam totius*, *OT* §2), will-be-celibate persons learn there as children the value of fidelity.

About his childhood John Paul said: “Sometimes I would wake up during the night and find my father on his knees, just as I would always see him kneeling in the parish church. We never spoke about a vocation to the priesthood, but *his example was in a way my first seminary, a kind of domestic seminary.*”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Bernard Häring,

the renowned moral theologian, in his reflection on priesthood, writes, "I believe that a happy marriage is a worthy image for a genuine and charismatically lived celibacy."<sup>5</sup> To this John Paul adds, "Perfect conjugal love must be marked by that fidelity . . . on which religious profession and priestly celibacy are founded" (*Theology*, p. 277). Again, there is mutual support between the two vocations well lived.

*Total Gift of Oneself.* Marriage depends also on the total gift of oneself. Man and woman give themselves to each other totally. This includes their bodies. In Ephesians St. Paul says: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. . . . In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own body. He who loves his wife loves himself" (Ep 5:21-28). And elsewhere he says: "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but her husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Co 7:3-4). John Paul confirms this total self-giving:

The first communion is the one which is established and which develops between husband and wife: by virtue of the covenant of married life, the man and woman "are no longer two but one flesh," and they are called to grow continually in their communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving . . . revealing in this way to the church and to the world the new communion of love, given by the grace of Christ. (*FC* §19)

This mutual giving is a great example and inspiration for celibate persons in their total self-giving to Christ and his church. St. John Chrysostom even says, "If your marriage is like this, your perfection will rival



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the holiest of monks.”<sup>6</sup> This self-giving of husband and wife out of reverence to Christ opens the door to an authentic celibate vocation for their children if God later grants them this gift. The holy self-giving of their parents makes it easier for young people to give themselves totally to Christ and his church, even at the sacrifice of conjugal love.

*Paternity and Maternity.* In marriage and childbearing, husband and wife become father and mother. The child confirms the husband’s paternity and the wife’s maternity. This fatherhood and motherhood influences and shapes the life of the child. William Pollack, a clinical psychologist and a professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, tells of the importance of maternity and paternity in, for example, their son’s life: “Mothers help

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make boys into men. . . . Far from making boys weaker, the love of a mother can and does actually make boys stronger, emotionally and psychologically. . . . Fathers are not male mothers. . . . Fathers—through the warm, playful, emphatic relationships they forge with their sons—imbue boys with an important sense of safety and well-being that bolsters a boy’s feelings of masculine self-confidence.”<sup>7</sup>

John Paul sees the importance of paternity and maternity also in the lives of celibate men and women.

Celibate persons cannot forget and reject “the conjugal meaning of the body, which from the beginning has been inscribed in the personal makeup of man and woman” (*Theology*, p. 278). Created as sexual human beings, as men and women they carry in themselves paternity and maternity. As celibate persons they are called to live their sexuality well by developing spiritual paternity and maternity. This does not refute their celibacy; instead it simultaneously confirms it. John Paul asserts, “In spite of having renounced physical fecundity, the celibate person becomes spiritually fruitful, the father and mother of many, cooperating in the realization of the family according to God’s plan” (*FC* §16). He also says, “Conjugal love which finds its expression in continence for the kingdom of heaven must lead in its normal development to paternity and maternity in a spiritual sense . . . in a way analogous to conjugal love which matures in physical paternity and maternity” (*Theology*, p. 278).

Regarding this, St. Thérèse of Lisieux has shared her experience. When she was still living with her father, Thérèse called him “my dear King” because of his tenderness to her. It had a big impact in her life. Later, in her celibate Carmelite life, she experienced the Lord’s goodness even in her suffering of her father’s illness. She said, “Yes, Papa’s three years of martyrdom appear to me as the most lovable, the most fruitful of my life; I wouldn’t exchange them for all the ecstasies and revelations of the saints.”<sup>8</sup>

Healthy parents generate healthy children. Healthy marriages thus greatly inspire healthy celibate persons. Celibate persons are helped in developing their spiritual paternity and maternity if they experienced it in their family. *Nemo dat quod non habet*, nobody gives what



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they do not have. Celibate persons may have difficulty developing their spiritual paternity and maternity if they were greatly troubled by their parents' lack of it.

### **Contributions of Celibacy to Marriage**

*The Importance of the Kingdom of Heaven.* The destiny of human beings is the kingdom of heaven, not this world, which is passing away. People, therefore, must not become too attached to the goods of this world. Marriage is linked to this passing world. When Jesus debates with the Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection of the body, he asserts, "You are wrong . . . for in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mt 22:29). In accord with this, John Paul writes, "Marriage is tied in with the form of this world which is passing away and therefore in a certain sense imposes the necessity of being locked in this transiency" (*Theology*, p. 296).

As we know, celibacy is for the sake of the kingdom of heaven; it is not locked in the transiency of the world. The pope explains further this excellence of the celibate life:

"This perfect continence for love of the kingdom of heaven has always been held in high esteem by the church as a sign and stimulus of love, and as a singular source of spiritual fertility in the world" (*LG* §42). In virginity and celibacy, chastity retains its original meaning, that is, of human sexuality lived as a genuine sign of and precious service to the love of communion and of interpersonal giving. This meaning is fully found in virginity which makes evident, even in the renunciation of marriage, the 'nuptial meaning' of the body through a communion and a personal gift to Jesus Christ and his church which prefigures and anticipates the perfect and final communion and self-giving of the world to come. "In virginity or celibacy, the human being is awaiting, also in a bodily way, the

eschatological marriage of Christ with the church, giving himself or herself completely to the church in the hope that Christ may give himself to the church in the full truth of eternal life" (FC §16). (PDV §29)

In his exhortation to men and women religious, John Paul argues that, by the example of a chaste life, celibate persons can excellently testify to the world, particularly to families: "The consecrated life must present to today's

*Celibacy is a reminder or a witness  
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and that human beings' destiny  
is the kingdom of heaven.*

world examples of chastity lived by men and women who show balance, self-mastery, an enterprising spirit, and psychological and affective maturity. Thanks to this witness, human

love is offered a stable point of reference: the pure love which consecrated persons draw from the contemplation of Trinitarian love, revealed to us in Christ" (VC §88).

Celibacy is a reminder or a witness that marriage is temporary and that human beings' destiny is the kingdom of heaven. Insofar as all human life has an eschatological orientation, celibacy can be seen as "better" than marriage. It is an excellent witness for the world about the eternal life to come (see Mt 22:30).

Those who live married life need this witness. Particularly now many challenges come to married life from a hedonistic culture, which separates sexuality from objective moral norms. This culture often treats sexuality as a mere diversion and a consumer good. With the complicity of much in the media world, this cul-



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ture indulges in a kind of idolatry of the sexual instinct. The consequences are psychic and moral suffering on the part of individuals and families. Addressing men and women religious, he proposes that celibacy offers a rejoinder to this challenge:

The reply of the consecrated life is above all in the joyful living of perfect chastity, as a witness to the power of God's love manifested in the weakness of the human condition. The consecrated person attests that what many have believed impossible becomes, with the Lord's grace, possible and truly liberating. . . . This testimony is more necessary than ever today, precisely because it is so little understood by our world. It is offered to everyone—young people, engaged couples, husbands and wives and Christian families—in order to show that the power of God's love can accomplish great things precisely within the context of human love. (*VC* §88)

This celibate way of life can contribute more to the realization of the kingdom of heaven in its earthly dimension because it brings eschatological completion into the picture. It helps people realize something of the kingdom of heaven while they are still on earth, and it prepares for its complete fulfillment in future life.

*Affirmation of Marriage.* The only key to understanding the sacramentality of marriage is the spousal love of Christ for the church (see Ep 5:22-23). Celibacy for the kingdom of heaven is a particular response to the love of the divine Spouse, Jesus Christ, "the Son of the Virgin, who was himself a virgin, that is, a 'eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven,' in the most perfect meaning of the term" (*Theology*, p. 286). Thus, celibacy affirms the sacramentality of marriage.

This particular response to the divine Spouse's love supposes intimacy between the celibate person and the

divine Spouse. Michael H. Crosby describes this intimacy clearly: "When we speak of sexual intimacy, we refer to relationships which, given the natural course of things, are open to the possibility of genital expression. When we speak of celibate intimacy we are describing relationships which, by the mutual consent and commitment of the persons involved, are not open to future genital expression."<sup>9</sup> Crosby says further that the intimacy in celibate life is a contemplative intimacy, a life that is fully absorbed in the love of God. This absorption, for example, makes St. Thérèse of Lisieux in her suffering joyfully exclaim, "O Jesus, my Love, I have found my place in the bosom of the church: in the heart of my Mother, I will be love."<sup>10</sup>

This response to the divine Spouse's love is a unitive love. "The unitive love which consecrated celibacy symbolizes is what the great religious figures of our tradition have called contemplation. As a charism, celibacy is the public face of contemplative experience making visible in this world the absolute freedom, the captivating beauty, the supreme generosity, and the ultimate fidelity of that divine love that moves the sun and the other stars."<sup>11</sup> Bernard Häring sees this response as an act of trust in God alone: "To live celibacy and to love celibately in today's world is a venture that can be reasonably undertaken only when we place our trust, not in ourselves, but in God alone, and remain open to the guidance of Holy Mystery at all times."<sup>12</sup>

John Paul sees this celibate response to God's love as a contribution to marriage and family life. He emphasizes faithfulness or fidelity: "Christian couples have the right to expect from celibate persons a good example and a witness of fidelity to their vocation until death. Just as fidelity at times becomes difficult for married



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people and requires sacrifice, mortification, and self-denial, the same can happen to celibate persons, and their fidelity, even in the trials that may occur, should strengthen the fidelity of married couples” (*FC* §16). The celibate life, then, affirms marriage; it does so, uniquely, by renouncing it. John Paul says:

The realization of this call serves also in a particular way to confirm the nuptial meaning of the human body in its masculinity and femininity. The renunciation of marriage for the kingdom of heaven at the same time highlights that meaning in all its interior truth and personal beauty. We can say that this renunciation on the part of individual persons, men and women, in a certain sense is indispensable. This is so that the nuptial meaning of the body can be more easily recognized in the whole ethos of human life and above all in the ethos of conjugal and family life. (*Theology*, pp. 285-286)

### **Pieris’s Critical Words on Celibacy**

After hearing a “nice” reflection on celibacy, we need also to hear some critical remarks. Critical but also beneficial is the reflection on celibacy made by Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit who has written extensively on the way to be the Asian church. On our topic he makes use of the forgotten theological praxis of the early church.

Pieris reminds Pope Benedict of the great catholic synthesis of both/and instead of either/or.<sup>13</sup> Discussing future church ministries, Pieris stresses the equality of those who choose marriage or celibacy: “The difference between them is not based on any ‘intrinsic value’ that makes one superior to the other (on the basis that Jesus chose one of them rather than the other).”<sup>14</sup> He says that the idea of superior or inferior in state-of-life vocations

comes from the idea that holiness is hierarchically stratified and not charismatically diverse within one universal call to holiness, as Vatican Council II has stated.

According to Pieris, the question “‘Then what did my religious vows bestow upon me which I had not already been given at my baptism?’ [is] the question that disclosed the identity crisis of those men and women who thought that marriage was the Creator’s concession to ordinary people enfeebled by their flesh whereas as celibates they themselves were elevated to the higher life of the Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

Although he himself is a celibate religious, Pieris is critical of a celibacy based only on a superficial spirituality and a hunger for higher social status and financial security:

Celibacy even in religious life can be a deception if it is a guarantee of financial security. Collective ownership of property may reflect a situation wherein the personal practice of poverty is made comfortable through the security provided by a collectively enjoyed wealth. The marriage between the cult of money and the cult of celibacy must be dissolved for good. Otherwise, we shall continue to produce comfortable bachelors and spinsters in place of committed celibates.

Pieris reminds celibate persons that for the apostles the main scandal was money, not sex, and Judas was the main protagonist of it. He hopes that this scandal will not be repeated in the church of the future. He acknowledges, however, that the noble divine vocations to poverty and celibacy are complementary. He concludes by saying: “An evangelical reappraisal of marriage and celibacy is an urgent need. They must be treated as God-given rather than church-conferred vocations within the ministry, that is, within both sedentary ministry and itinerant ministry. Two there are, not one!”



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## Love Comprises All Vocations

As domestic church and first seminary, married life contributes to the celibate life the example of fidelity, total gift of oneself, and paternity and maternity. The celibate life, in turn, contributes to the married life the example of earthly life oriented to the kingdom of heaven and the example of genuine, pure, intimate love of God and of countless fellow human beings. Marriage and celibacy are complementary.

St. Augustine advises us, "Love and do what you will." Marriage and celibate life are two ways to respond to God's vocation to love. Married couples and celibates are called to love genuinely in their own ways. St. Thérèse of Lisieux tells us that, whatever our vocation is, "love comprises all vocations, that love is everything, that it embraces all times and places . . . in a word, that it is eternal."<sup>16</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), p. 273. Hereafter: *Theology*. [Texts quoted from this book are sometimes slightly modified in the light of new translations in the book's revised edition of 2006, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Ed.]

<sup>2</sup> *Theology*, p. 276.

<sup>3</sup> Here celibacy is understood as celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19:12). This term needs to be understood well since there are many reasons for celibacy, such as impotency, transcending gender, cultic celibacy, coerced celibacy, and celibacy to conserve semen. See Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (New York: Scribner, 2000), pp. 7-12.

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Häring, *Priesthood Imperiled: A Critical Examination of Ministry in the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Mo.: Triumph Books, 1989), p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> William Pollack, *Real Boys* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), pp. 81, 113, 115-116.

<sup>8</sup> See *Story of a Soul: Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996), p. 37 & 157.

<sup>9</sup> Michael H. Crosby, *Celibacy: Means of Control or Mandate of the Heart?* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1996), p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> Thérèse, *Story*, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Crosby, *Celibacy*, p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> Häring, *Priesthood Imperiled*, p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> See the message of Benedict XVI to the priests in the dioceses of Bellune-Feltre and Treviso, 16 August 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Aloysius Pieris SJ, "Two There Are, Your Holiness: Suggestions for the Next Pope's Agenda in Line with John Paul II's Invitation in *Ut Unum Sint*," at [www.theokuleuven.be/cht](http://www.theokuleuven.be/cht).

<sup>15</sup> Aloysius Pieris SJ, "Vatican II: A 'Crisigenic' Council with an Unwritten Agenda," at [www.sedos.org/english/pieris.htm](http://www.sedos.org/english/pieris.htm).

<sup>16</sup> See Thérèse, *Story*, p. 194.

### Poets' Addresses

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