

Chaste Celibacy and Spiritual Fatherhood
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Fifteen years ago Pope John Paul II wrote a challenging document for seminary formators, rectors, and bishops, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. It changed the landscape of seminary formation and began a new consciousness within seminary culture: the mission of seminary formation was to be placed within a rich context that explicitly served the seminarian's intellectual, affective, spiritual, and pastoral development. These became known as the four pillars of formation. The formation of a priest is a lengthy and complex endeavor. The Church, by way of the seminarian's family, his parish, previous religious instruction, and spiritual development, culminating in seminary formation itself, seeks to lead a man to Christ so that this man might come to endure the challenge that divine love bears: *You, Seminarian, are thirsty; I, The Christ, am your thirst quenched. Do you want your thirst slaked, or do you want only to go on drinking, tasting, searching; or even hiding, running, arguing, ...I am the Sabbath rest, let Me enter you. I know you, do you want to be known?*

Seminary formators have the awesome challenge of mediating this startling challenge from Christ to seminarians, "do you want to know and be known by My Father?" Formation, then, is about leading, encouraging, and inspiring a man to give himself over to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in an act of complete oblation. This oblation is received by God, enabled by God in Christ through the Spirit, and reaches its point of drama on the floor of the Cathedral when the former seminarian-- now deacon and soon to be priest-- prostrates himself before the altar and bishop and gives himself to God

completely so that Christ's mysteries might be lived over again in him. In the process of formation, one hopes the seminarian becomes eager to let Christ affect him, guide him, and live in Him. In so doing, Christ does an astounding act: He entrusts the spiritual welfare of the Church, His own bride, to the newly ordained priest. Christ entrusts a share of His own priesthood to the man. Here is the fullness of the sign value of chaste celibacy. The renunciation of marriage as a pragmatic move assisting his availability for service as priest does not exhaust the meaning of his chaste celibacy. What kind of life, then, is worthy to take a normal, affectively mature male away from the delight of a wife and the ennobling duties and purifying commitments of fatherhood? It has to be a life given to him by way of a Divine encounter. Within this encounter Christ brings an invitation: *As I continue to work at the right hand of my Father, pouring out our mutual love upon the world in the Spirit for its healing and salvation, would you care for my bride as she labors in time to receive this love and so come to know her dignity, worth, and salvation? Would you welcome My form of embodiment, chaste celibacy, as gift from Me and for the Church so that I might care for My bride through your hands, from your heart, and by way of your intellect and will? May I configure your life to Mine for the sake of the Bride? Would you offer your life, poured out like a libation and given over to the Father, as a gift to Me, so that through your gift I may continue to draw all to Myself through sacramental signs? Are you willing to let Me live My paschal mystery over again in you?*

Candidate: "I am, with the help of God" (Rite of Ordination).

Such an offer appears eminently worthy to accept once an authentic priestly vocation has been discerned. The sacrifice of wife and children appears noble and truly humbling. Noting that no man has a completely pure motive for becoming a priest - self interest always enters, as it does with those called to marriage - seminary formators must take note of a candidate's level of willingness to engage this invitation from Christ. Does the candidate delight in such a call; does he desire to forego marriage so as to minister the marriage of Christ to His Church through sacramental signs?¹

In the early stages of seminary formation men normally struggle to accept Christ's call to be *embodied in the same way He was* more than he does with accepting other aspects of priestly life. All of priestly life has its challenges, but, for obvious reasons, foregoing sexual love in marriage is weighted more heavily in discernment by new seminarians. This struggle, when present, will not develop into a peaceful embracing of chaste celibacy if seminary formation speaks only the language of Church discipline and the sociological language of availability for service. Such minimalizing of celibacy can only serve to promote very questionable men to the priesthood and a functional disposition regarding priestly identity. What kind of man would give up the choice of marriage simply because an ecclesial leader says such makes priestly life easier for all involved? This disposition tries to hide the depth of sacrifice involved and, in the end, does injustice

¹ The complexity and richness of the priest's vocation is not exhausted simply by entering into Christ's own identity as Chaste Spouse but is also illuminated by other analogies and identities as well. The priest also shares in Christ's mission as Good Shepherd, Divine Physician, and Spiritual Father. Christ invites a man to allow the entire mystery of His saving identity reach the Church by way of his priestly ministry, a ministry and life configured to all these Christic identities.

to the man discerning priesthood. And so, approaching the call to celibacy within the framework of communion with Christ is essential. In this communion the invitation is personal and disciplinary, a seminarian wants to receive what Christ is asking, “Will you serve the mission of salvation by configuring your life and your body in the same way I configured mine? Will you be a sign of hope for the people and a sign of sacrificial love, even as I draw you into my Paschal Mystery from deep within the heart, a heart fed by the Holy Spirit as love and the river of sacramental living?” In this invitation is not simply a pragmatic call to remain single for reasons of pastoral accessibility. It is an invitation to personal challenge and sacrifice. When truly discerned as one’s authentic vocation, however, it is an invitation that carries deep consolation as well. Most especially the priest receives the consolation of the Holy Spirit even in the midst of sacrificial living.

PRIEST AS SPOUSE

Truly, the chaste celibate life of a priest has to be the fruit of a personal communion with Christ, not simply the result of an institutional policy or a personal choice due to one’s “personality” (i.e. “I prefer to be single”). In reality, no responsible seminary rector or formation leader would ever minimize celibacy in the way I described. Such a pattern, however, can be found in seminarians who are reticent to enter into the spiritual and affective core of their heart during formation. In fear, they may simply grit their teeth and go through formation “being good” but never learning to

receive and depend upon the indwelling Holy Spirit. They may rationalize their call to celibacy as a way of life that is good for the Church; it becomes then entirely a stance of service or self-discipline. This disposition may produce a man who functions as a priest, but how could he flourish as one?

Prayerful communion with the Bridegroom, Who entrusts His own bride to the priest, is crucial for a potent life and ministry. This communion is similar to that of the apostles and John the Baptist with Christ: “He must increase I must decrease” (Jn 3:30; Mk 10:42f). In other words, the more the seminarian entrusts himself to the mystery of priestly life and ministry the more the bride will search for Christ in the priest's vocation of self-giving. The Church will notice with joy that the priest is a man who reveals Christ because *he has first learned to receive Christ in and through the Holy Spirit*. The Church will seek the priest because he accepts his vocation to embrace the holy. The Church will seek the priest when She looks for Christ because the priest has suffered the coming of nuptial love in his response to ordination and his dedication to sacramental service, a suffering buoyed by deep spiritual friendship with Christ.

As with any husband, Christ and the bride teach a man how to love, how to give of self. Within the mystery of this communion with both Christ and His Bride, the priest delights in his chaste celibacy as a way of being with Christ (Christ: “I share with you what I myself knew”) and with the Bride (the Church: “I receive from you, my pastor, disinterested self service; I receive your chaste gift of self”).² The priest shows the bride where Christ can be found, and the Church seeks Christ in and through the gift of priestly

² See John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 50.

ministry. This last response by the Church is not given for any one individual priest to build his ego upon. God can raise up priests from stones (Mt.3:9), if He so desired. This response from the Church is only given to the *holy priest* whose ego has crashed upon the rocks of illumined interiority and service to the poor. The Church may also pursue the priest in a less inspiring, disinterested fashion; Penitent: “Are you a priest? Priest: “Yes.” Penitent: “Good; you will do; please hear my confession.” Regardless of whether the man is the ‘holy priest’ or the ‘available’ priest, he is not the end. The penitent is looking for CHRIST within the priest’s heart not the priest himself. The affectively mature priest will find the fullness of meaning in this call: I mediate Christ. The affectively immature priest will instead wallow in the unhappiness known in his never having garnered enough attention or affirmation. “For in loving the Church wholeheartedly, the priest simultaneously loves Christ the Lord, who is one Body with [the Church]. Just as Christ suffered for [the Bride]...so the priest must suffer in love for the Church, offering his life in service and in witness to a love that is greater than this world.”³ To desire to be Christ’s *suffering love for the Church* is the deep wellspring within the heart of the chaste celibate priest enabling him to care for His Bride. *Any husband and father* worthy of such a name desires to suffer in love for his bride. That is his dignity and joy.

His purification is in his self giving, not in looking to be affirmed. Fatherhood is about launching children in joy to live lives of spiritual meaning and civic contribution. If these children affirm him, all the better and deeper his joy of life, but if they stumble in such gratitude or love, the father still delights in the service he rendered because he sees its fruit in the lives of his children. What is at stake in this more mystical appropriation

³ John M. McDermott, SJ and Robert Kroll, SJ, “Virginity for the Sake of the Kingdom” in John M. McDermott SJ,et.al, Eds. : John Paul II on the Body (Phil: St. Joseph University Press, 2007) 281.

of chaste celibacy? It is an ever deepening reception of grace, of communion with Christ; an ever deepening personal happiness.

John Paul II highlighted the bridegroom identity of the Christ for the priest by noting that the priest shares in the vocation of Christ's self-sacrificial offering, an act of nourishing and cherishing the Church. "The priest is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, the Spouse of the Church...in virtue of his configuration to Christ...the priest stands in this spousal relationship with regard to the community...In his spiritual life, therefore, [the priest] is called to live out Christ's spousal love towards the Church, his Bride." (n. 22 *PDV*). John Paul II articulates the core of this spirituality as the priest's participation in Christ's own pastoral charity. The chaste celibate life of the priest flows from this mystical bond with Christ as He wills to share His own pastoral charity with the priest. This sharing of Christ's own pastoral charity denotes the close and essential relationship between mission and interiority. Without a man receiving the power of Christ's own pastoral charity from within a lively prayer and sacramental life, a priest's life may become exhausted and pained. The *Program for Priestly Formation* (5th edition) expresses the spirituality of celibacy this way: Priests are called to "a life of celibate chastity that serves both as a sign and stimulus of love, and as a singular source of spiritual fertility in the world, and being freely accepted, shows that the priest is consecrated in a new way to Christ and offers in himself a reflection of the virginal love of Christ for the Church" (PPF, n. 26). The priest gives himself to the Church in the complete oblation of his ordination; he gives himself to the Bride of Christ so as to care

for her spiritual needs and nourish her with the sacraments. In this act Christ invites the priest to share in His own espousal to the Church.

Some seminarians stumble with this reality in their imagination and thus prematurely reject the powerful and affirming imagery of nuptial love in their priesthood. Note that each man upon his ordination responds to Christ's invitation to share in His complete self-giving. Thus the priest gathers up his masculine identity by committing himself to a life of self-offering, a life of service to the spiritual welfare of the Church. In so doing, this man does not somehow marry each member of the Church as if, in the misdirected fears of a seminarian, he is to somehow imagine being espoused to the overweight, balding member of his parish in the first pew. No, the nuptial imagery captures the totality of the gift. The priest is not "marrying" each member of the Church but is consecrating his erotic desire to respond fully to the call from Christ and so receive a share of *His* spousal identity. This identity of the priest as chaste spouse is crucial for the man to enter, and receive, since he is always a sexual being, always a man ordered toward the giving of his life to a bride.

Pope Benedict XVI sheds light onto this:

"First, *eros* is somehow rooted in man's very nature; Adam is a seeker, who 'abandons his mother and father' in order to find woman; only together do the two represent complete humanity and become 'one flesh.' The second aspect is equally important. From the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, to a bond which is unique and definitive; thus, and only thus, does it fulfill its deepest purpose. Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love. This close connection between *eros* and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature." (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 11).

The priest is privileged to enter this mystery of *imaging God loving His people* by way of the grace of Christ's own spousal status *toward the Church*; whereas the married man images Christ by drawing from Christ's nuptial self-offering upon the cross in a commitment to *a particular woman*. The discernment question for the young seminarian is clear: what kind of spousal identity is Christ calling you into, the sacrament of priesthood or the sacrament of marriage? The formation question for all seminarians is not about choosing marriage or foregoing marriage but is a question about what *kind* of marriage he is being called to enter?

Pope Benedict insightfully describes the content of this nuptial love, this love that both married man and priest are eager to enter:

“Yet *eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to ‘be there for’ the other. The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. *Jn* 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. *Jn* 19:34)” (*DCE*, n. 7).

The emotionally and spiritually healthy seminarian must allow the mystery of Christ's self-giving and his own need to receive love to define his priesthood. “The most fruitful activity of the human being is to be able to receive the love of God.”⁴ Something of the mystery of Christ's *eros* being *agape*, His desires and His gift being one, needs to pass

⁴ Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005) 37.

over into the priest's affective and intellectual life. For both the priest and the husband, *agape* must enter *eros*. No man matures in spiritual living and self-giving without this integration occurring. Such an integration, however, requires a purification that releases pain, a pain caused by foregoing selfish desire. Into one's own desires the good of the other must flow. Only when a man's desire considers the good of the other does *agape* purify *eros*. Pope Benedict is quick to add, however, that no human being lives to simply give himself away in service. All humans must cultivate an ease in receiving the Holy Spirit, Who is love. An affectively healthy male has intimacy needs that must find rest in virtuous friendship. For the married man this is normally and best accomplished by his wife, although he also needs male friends and friendships with other couples as well. These friends complement and complete his need *to be loved*, inclusive of his wife's love, but beyond it. The priest has similar friendship needs, but none are to be primary as analogue to a wife. Certainly virtuous friendships with other men, particularly lay men who are husbands, can deepen the priest's own identity as Chaste Spouse. Alternately, for a married layman, a friend who is a priest can order his will and affection beyond wife and family toward God, the only communion we all ultimately rest in.

To support him in prayer and virtue, the priest is invited to enter deep personal friendships with other priests, friendships based upon heartfelt communion with and in Christ. The deepest friendship for the priest, however, is with Christ, the One who called him to care for the Bride. Priestly celibacy is "Christocentric or it is nothing. This is the single most important thing to be said about celibacy."⁵

⁵ Christopher Ruddy, *Tested in Every Way* (NY:Herder and Herder, 2006) 138.

PRIEST AS FATHER

If, on ordination day, the priest finds his spousal identity in his *overall oblation to the Church*, what is the sign value of his serving individual members of his parish? In relation *to each member* of the Church, the priest is accepting and knowing his identity as *spiritual father not as spouse*. This identity recognizes that the priest is supposed to possess competencies in spiritual direction, catechesis, and prayer that are helpful to the laity in their own quest for spiritual maturation. The diocesan priest is not to define himself over and against the laity but is to be *for* the laity, *zealous* for their holiness. The priest as spiritual father gives himself in service to the religious needs of his people among, with, and for them. This is the reason Christ called the priest to care for the Church in His Name. Such spiritual fatherhood, however, needs a more concentrated and intentional formation than is currently present in most seminaries. This is not a new plea. St. Francis de Sales noted that a parishioner should not entrust him or herself for direction simply to any priest because “fewer men than we realize are capable of this task.”⁶ John Paul II noted that priests should be spiritual fathers living “the Paschal Mystery in a way that they will know how to initiate into it the people committed to their charge”(PDV, n. 45). Thus, the priest is both husband in his total oblation to service to the Church and father in his zealous concern for the *spiritual* lives of its members. His life of chaste celibacy serves these identities in both his own depth of communion with Christ as source

⁶ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (NY:Image, 1989) 47.

of his pastoral love and in his own self-donation toward the Church as embodied gift to its spiritual and moral formation.

The spiritual fatherhood of the parish priest is best fulfilled in his pursuit of competency in all matters spiritual, especially spiritual direction. With a realistic nod toward all the priest must accomplish in the temporal sphere as pastor, the time has come for him to truly listen to the cry of spiritual hunger emanating from his parishioners. To hear this cry is to be moved to become a competent guide to interiority. Seminaries must place the training of spiritual direction near the core of their mission. Today many bishops spend thousands of dollars training their seminarians in Clinical Pastoral Education models. These models are more or less helpful to seminarians in a precise and narrow field: sensitivity to the ecumenical nature of visiting hospital patients in a non-judgmental fashion. Such Clinical Pastoral Education emphasizes growth in seminarian tolerance and self-discipline so that he does not coerce belief upon patients who are in a vulnerable emotional state due to illness. This training has some merit, but think of all the Catholic parishioners and hospital patients desiring *specific direction in prayer* and interiority from *an explicitly Catholic ethos*, who now languish due to the lack of competent men who can guide them.

Spiritual Fatherhood is a key priestly identity, one deeply connected to a man's total oblation to the service of the Church. From this fatherly identity flows a wisdom born of his own interior journey and personal appropriation of the mystery of Christ as communicated through the indwelling Spirit. Such wisdom is given to the priest so that it can be given to his spiritual sons and daughters. It must not be an arcane specialty studied only by motivated laity and religious in a university setting. Each diocesan seminary

should produce contemplative theologians, men of interiority who have suffered the coming of Christ under their own spiritual fathers' direction and supplemented by deeper and formal classes on the skills of such direction. As John Paul II noted, "One aspect of the priest's mission, and certainly by no means a secondary aspect, is that he is to be a teacher of prayer...the priest will only be able to train others in this school of Jesus at prayer, if he himself has been trained in it and continues to receive its formation...Christians expect to find in the priest...above all a man who will help them turn to God."⁷ John Paul II also spoke about the spiritual fatherhood of the priest in a meditation on St. Joseph, "[St. Joseph] became a father in an extraordinary way, without begetting his son in the flesh. Isn't this, perhaps, an example of the type of fatherhood that is proposed to us, priests and bishops, as a model? Everything I did in the course of my ministry I saw as an expression of this kind of fatherhood... a way of living out that fatherhood."⁸

Conclusion:

A man called to the priesthood sacrifices a wife and children in response to Christ entrusting him with His own Bride. This generous response to a humbling vocation does not ask of any man the sacrifice of his masculine identity. All priests are to endure and thrive within the giving over of the self for the good of another. Christ asks all men called to the priesthood to be husband and father. To give a complete oblation to a nuptial

⁷ PDV, n. 47.

⁸ John Paul II, *Rise Let Us Be On Our Way*, (NY: Warner Books, 2004) p.141

covenant, to be a husband, rests deep inside the desires of all men. To serve others in a spirit of generous fatherhood crowns this self giving. In both these identities, the seminarian and the priest seek their happiness, a happiness known in sharing the mystery of Christ, the mystery of being embodied for spiritual generativity, the mystery of finding happiness in the paradox of sacrifice.

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