

Living Evangelical Celibacy in Times of Crisis

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There is no doubt that changing attitudes towards sexuality have come about. A strong cultural and ethical transformation, especially in this area of human experience, has taken place in many societies. The attitudes of young people and adults, which are revealed by their sexual conduct, are very permissive. It seems that moral rigorism has become extreme permissiveness; negative, repressive attitudes have turned into subjective and arbitrary life

Very quickly, and in a short period of time, a parallelism has occurred between the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church regarding sexual matters and concrete behavior of men and women, including that of the faithful. Without a doubt this disconnect and distancing is not just a current development. There has always been some distance between theory and practice, between the ideal and the real. However, in society today, the distancing appears more evident, and what is real is strongly calling into question both theory and ideal.

This conditioning and these difficulties incite and influence the conception of *celibacy* which, as articulated by Vatican II, many considered to be something impossible.¹ The words that Father Voillaume would say to the Little Brothers of Jesus in the 1950s continue to ring true today: "Today more than ever, it is difficult for a religious to observe chastity [...] from the moment one is called to live the commitment to be chaste in a world where nobody recognizes or values it. Of all the people who surround us, very few of them believe that chastity is possible."²

¹ PAUL VI, Conciliar Decree, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (1965), 16.

² Taken from AMADEO CENCINI, *Por amor, con amor, en amor*, Sociedad Editorial Atenas, Madrid, 1996, 137-138.

The truth about human sexuality

But is everything difficult, ambiguous, and conditional? Is it all negative and detrimental? Our objective, as stated in the beginning, is to analyze the present socio-cultural context and expressly refer to the difficulties that are a part of the attempt to live a serene and joyful lifestyle as a celibate. Perhaps the first important phenomenon that has unleashed and that has accompanied the changes produced in sexual behavior has been the reflection on the same human sexuality and on its normative foundations. It is not just about simple "reforms." To comprehend human sexuality we find ourselves with a true "revolutionary transformation."³ In the face of taboos or past fears, a new attitude has developed that seeks to substitute truth for fear with regards to sexuality.

Scientific studies, especially the Human Sciences, have dissipated many prejudices and negative conceptions about human sexuality and have helped to better comprehend its value and its richness. The basis of comprehending sexuality in relation to the human person is that it forms an integral part of one's personality and of his or her educative process. As Paul Ricoeur has expressed, it is our sexuality that discovers the mystery of the person and, in doing so, the person manifests the mystery of his or her sexuality. Reflections about the sexual condition of the human being reveal that sexuality is a rich and complex reality, which cannot be reduced to biology, but rather that pervades, embarks, and affects the whole human being, and is, furthermore, a reality in which the evolutionary dynamism of the person takes part. Far from being once and forever the same in the individual, one's sexuality grows and progressively develops in evolutionary stages. It is through one's sexuality that one opens him or herself up to others, is capable of relationship and communication, of love and of transmitting life. The integral significance, the relational, communicative, loving dimension, the evolutionary character, together with a reevaluation of the body, the deep sense of equality and complementarity of the sexes, a positive vision of pleasure, express perhaps the values that, in a special way, enhance the present sexual culture.

In regard to celibacy, this new culture provides interesting aspects which can be of benefit to those committed to religious life. Here I simply cite some examples to make my point clearer: the fall

³ Cf., CARTER T. HEYWARD, "Nota sobre la fundamentación histórica, más allá del esencialismo sexual," in COLLECTION, *La sexualidad y lo sagrado*, Desclée de Brouwer, Bilbao, 1996, 50; COSMO PUERTO PASCUAL, "Las tendencias antropológicas de la sexualidad ante las puertas del nuevo milenio," in Collection, *Revisión de la comprensión cristiana de la sexualidad*, Nueva Utopía, 1997, 19-24.

of repressive taboos, the surmounting of a negative conception of chastity (identified simply as negation, continence, and renouncement), the rediscovery of the body, the desire to progress in affective maturity, more intimate relationships arrived at through more personal communication, the positive attitude of friendship, and the search for more loving, tender, and caring expressions. To live such values in the celibate life constitutes an authentic challenge of courage that understands chastity as “the capacity of guiding the sexual instinct to the service of love and of integrating it in the development of the person.”⁴

Time of Crisis

To assimilate it and to live celibacy joyfully as a celibate on the threshold of the 21st century, we must, in a critical way, authentically discern our place in this era of change, of cultural crisis, of economic instability, and political uncertainty. To describe the present situation of society, sociologists speak of social change. Perhaps no changes have been more decisive than those which arose during the Industrial Revolution. It is there, as Moser points out, where we find the axis of the shift from a closed society to an open one.⁵ The industrial society, more than any post-industrial phase, evolves into a pluralistic society, and reflects the capitalist-liberal system and advances towards a secularism in which religion and all that it implies and stands for is reduced to a private matter. All of this is manifested and carries with it multiple implications in the area of sexuality.

Sexual liberation and the sexual revolution have brought with them, above all, a great pluralism as to the cultural interpretation of sexuality in regards to behavior. Here we can think of attitudes that are disclosed about sexual relations in adolescents, homosexuality, and birth control. Pluralism frequently produces perplexity. It is not easy to unwed oneself from the “clear and distinct ideas” of the past, nor move from such certitudes to uncertainty. Paul VI, recognizing this cultural pluralism, honestly affirmed that in the face of such a variety of situations “it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity.”⁶ Without even applying his words to the questions around sexuality, they are a call to listen to the voice that is heard in the midst of perplexity, to

⁴ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, “*Educational Guidance in Human Love*” (1983), 18.

⁵ Cf., ANTONIO MOSER, “Sexualidad,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, UCA, El Salvador, 1993, 110.

⁶ PAUL VI, Apostolic Letter, *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), 4.

recognize pluralism, and to know how to live with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Within the framework of pluralism the prevailing vision which drives the neo-capitalism liberal is called “sexual liberation.” If in the beginning it was possible to see that it was really liberation from repressive situations, it no longer can be seen as such in that it has generated a devaluation similar to that of economics: always wanting to have more money but becoming impoverished, or having more pleasure but not finding true happiness.⁷ Furthermore, the devaluation of sexuality is accompanied by a devaluation of true liberty. Disapproving of responsibility, freedom becomes arbitrary and a self-deception; and in this way sexuality is separated from the person, objectified, and converted into an object of mass consumption.

Along with this liberal vision, it is not surprising that the social dimension of human sexuality gets lost. Today’s sexual culture is marked by individualism: “this is mine,” “my personal life is nobody’s business.” For many, individualism constitutes one of the great achievements of modern civilization: it guarantees people the right to choose their own rules of life, to make decisions conscious of the convictions and values they wish to adopt, and to configure their lives from among a wide variety of choices. The dignity of the person and exercise of his or her rights is defended. However, at the same time, individualism, to put myself at the center of my being, narrows our lives, impoverishes meaning, and tends to cause us to lose interest in others. But, above all, in the area of sexuality it leads to relativism, narcissism, and permissiveness, that are reflected in culture today.

Finally, in this brief description of the socio-cultural context in which we live as consecrated celibates, the phenomenon of secularism takes on particular relevance. According to Paul VI, secularism is “the characteristic mark” of the contemporary world and represents “*a concept of the world according to which the latter is self-explanatory, without any need for recourse to God.*”⁸

The influence of lay, secular culture affects not only the social models of sexuality, but also has repercussions on consecrated life, and presents extreme difficulties for living the gift of celibacy for the Kingdom.

⁷ Cf., JOSÉ IGNACIO GONZÁLEZ FAUS, *Sexo, verdades y discurso eclesialístico*, Sal Térrea, Santander, 1994, 17-19.

⁸ PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), 55.

From Humanization to Moral Anonymity

The new cultural tendencies regarding sexuality were inherited from anthropocentrism and the vindication of liberty which modernity proposes. From this cultural climate, sex has been vindicated, exhibited, and magnified. But has it been humanized? When it is thought that "to make love" is a good in itself, and even better the more often it happens, in whatever way possible or imaginable, between the greatest number of persons, and for the longest possible amount of time,⁹ liberty and sexuality lose their human content, are devalued and dehumanized, and thus lose their true quality. In the 70s, Paul Ricoeur warned of the dehumanization of genital sex, empty of human content. Sex is depersonalized and becomes banal and made insignificant, or rather, it loses meaning and the human message of the one who is its bearer.¹⁰ Today's prevailing culture makes human sexuality banal by uniting it only to the body and egoistic pleasure, interpreting it and living it in a reductive manner, simply as a product of consumption, as that which has no other meaning than that of a pleasing and gratifying exercise. In this way, the absolutizing of it and the pretension of it as liberating without limits lead to and result in its dehumanization.¹¹

Within this superficial, depersonalized, and hedonistic climate, there is a tendency to distance sexuality from any moral objective norm.¹² It is a fact that the sexual liberation movements have transformed traditional sexual morals from top to bottom. In reality, socially it has gotten to the point that sex and morals have been disassociated, and sex-sin has been replaced with sex-pleasure. In place of the moral face of the past, sex in society today presents a functional definition, erotic and psychological, which no longer must be observed, repressed, or sublimated; on the contrary, it should be expressed without limitations, brakes, or taboos. Above all, there exists no homogeneous ethic: "*The individualistic process has undermined any consensus about dignity or indignity, normal or pathologic, the absolutism of good and bad has given way to sexual indulgence of the masses.*"¹³ Because of this, all attitudes towards sexuality have equal value and validity, anything can be chosen,

⁹ Cf., DAVID COOPER, *La muerte de la familia*, Ariel, Barcelona, 1984, 55.

¹⁰ PAUL RICOEUR, "La merveille, l'errante, l'énigme," in *Esprit*, n. 11 (1960), 1665-1666.

¹¹ Cf., JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiari Consortio* (1981), 37; Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), 44.

¹² Cf., JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* (1996), 88.

¹³ GILLES LIPOVETSKY, *El crepúsculo del deber. La ética incolora de los nuevos tiempos democráticos*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 1994, 61.

nothing should be repressed or obligatory. What in the past was a moral obligation is now nothing more than one possible individual election. The moral obligation is limited to the desire of not depending on anyone else or to protecting one's self from the risks of AIDS.

From this perspective of moral anomaly there is a tendency to legitimize daily behavior, to separate sex from love, love from fidelity, sexuality from procreation, a separation that produces multiple faces because love and fidelity make sacred the quality of life and relationships; they not only express the vocation of the person, but also the space which is neither manipulated or betrayed.

Finally, I want to allude to a phenomenon also generated by today's social context, and especially important to the living of celibate chastity. It has its roots in the fall of truth, in that diffuse nihilism which post-modernity proclaimed and called "weak thinking," in the disenchantment and collapse of hope. Together with some effects, frequently pointed out, as in the obscuring of great values or of ethical confusion, there are others which are just becoming noticed, for example, the banalization of beauty or the crisis of a sense of the aesthetic. That beauty is far from present culture and from fragmented technological knowing, and that aesthetic value is rendered defenseless and runs the risk of losing its spiritual value and its connection to what is good and true, is something that today is being manifested on many fronts.

Amadeo Cencini assures that, in our society, the celibate himself is in crisis, unable to unify beauty and celibacy, a crisis in which he is unable to experience the truth and conviction that to surrender one's self to God through virginity is not only holy and functional in the realization of ministry, but also "beautiful." This progressively diminishes the value and the desire of seeking the fullness and pleasure of life as the center of the celibate experience. To live virginity unrelated to beauty would be to deform and betray it.¹⁴ It would be to live celibacy simply as a moral or ascetic obligation. It is true that celibacy implies commitment and renunciation, obligation and self-control. But if it does not express a charismatic dimension, symbolic and aesthetic, if it does not reach the point of being esteemed as the precious pearl that one finds in a field, then it is probable that one will not give testimony of the true, authentic celibate value.

All of these phenomena make up the atmosphere of the cultural context of today. In the midst of all this we live celibacy; and, in such

¹⁴ Cf. AMADEO CENCINI, *op. cit.*, 152-158.

a way, we see ourselves and, at times, ask ourselves if it is all worth it and if what we do really gives testimony to the men and women of the world.

Chosen for Loving Service

The present crisis of celibacy manifests itself not only in the fact that, sociologically, it may no longer be considered as valuable and acceptable, of having to live it in an unfavorable climate or one in which sexuality is so highly exalted; but also in the knowledge of numerous priests and religious who have renounced their celibate commitment, the publicity given to sexual scandals by people consecrated to God, as well as the polemic about linking celibacy with priestly ministry. All of this is behind the present crisis and calls into question a sense of meaning and stimulates both revision and renovation.

The apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, points out a few valuable tracks from the evangelical counsels for living out virginity that, in many ways, respond to our lines of questioning. John Paul II says: *"In virginity and in 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 gift of self to others.... The synod would like to see celibacy presented and explained in the fullness of its biblical, theological and spiritual richness, as a precious gift given by God to his Church and as a sign of the kingdom which is not of this world.... Celibacy, then, is to be welcomed and continually renewed with a free and loving decision as a priceless gift from God."*¹⁵

In a precise way, the text brings out some aspects that can significantly aid in the understanding and positive living out of celibacy: the sense of charism (precious gift given by God for the Church), the free option ("to be welcomed as a free and loving decision") and the love of communion and gift. These have always been considered essential aspects, but in the present social context they regain decisive significance.

Clearly, the text stresses that we should not be overly concerned about the adverse climate towards celibacy. No value of the Kingdom is easily recognized or accepted in the present culture. Then again, celibacy embraced by religious serves a completely different purpose than ecclesial celibacy. Ecclesial celibacy is a canonical norm imposed to provide the best quality of priestly service for the faithful. Whereas celibacy in religious life strives for a prophetic dimension: to radiate values to the human community and is a call to incarnate the challenge and the effort of a life of love. It can be said that the

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), 29.

call to celibacy, more than any project and personal effort, is really an election; that is, rather than our choosing celibacy, celibacy chooses us. We embrace it because we are attracted by the Spirit of Jesus to the point where we want to identify ourselves with his life. In this way celibacy is not, nor can it ever be, a social status, a form of life, or an ethical or aesthetic commitment. It is a gift of God, grace, given from the love of God, love without limits, and it is the vocation of love. Celibacy in the consecrated life is not, then, running from a hostile reality, is not volition or a human project; it is not simply a renouncement or continence; it is not comfort or a disdain of sexuality; it is not a practical motive of apostolic efficacy. It is a road to grace and love, that comes from Love and leads to Love. It is necessary, then, if we seek its deepest meaning, to cleanse or purify it from the unhealthy adherences that impoverish it and to root it once again in authentic gospel motives: Christ and his Kingdom.

From the perspective of charism, this same culture stimulates the living of celibacy as a vocation. To this call, a person must respond freely. Why not emphasize celibacy as a free election and the need always to live it in freedom? Accepted, desired and freely embraced, virginity can come to be for celibates a positive value, worthy of appreciation. Rondet assures that the present crisis of celibacy shows that many of those who leave it never really wanted it. Celibacy, for them, simply represented a required condition of priesthood or to enter a religious institute, whose ideals captivated them. They saw celibacy as a kind of contract, as a renouncement and as a difficulty which had to be assumed.¹⁶ If vocation does not constitute that which is to be realized in one's life, if it is not positively appreciated, if it is not the hidden "pearl," in moments of difficulty, everything easily unravels.

Finally, to understand sexuality, the present sexual context highlights its relation to love, although in practice, as we have denounced, divisions are frequently established. This relational sense of sexuality, communicative and loving, offers, as well, a horizon for understanding evangelical celibacy. Some have even proposed to change the classical terminology of the evangelical counsel (chastity, celibacy, virginity) and substitute the "vow for relationship" for it.¹⁷ What is behind this thinking is that the vow not only denotes bodily renunciation, sexuality, procreation or pleasure, but there is also a desire to express better the work of growth toward an authentic personality and a life open to relationship and love.

¹⁶ Cf. MICHEL RONDET - YVES RAGUIN, *El celibato evangélico en un mundo mixto*, Sal Térrea, Santander, 1980, 100-102.

¹⁷ DIARMUID O'MURCHU, *Rehacer la vida religiosa*, Publicaciones Claretianas, Madrid, 2001, 58-59.

This is not the time to debate such a proposal. But it is helpful to understand its essential affirmation: consecrated virginity is an act of love of Christ, a response to the seduction of his love, a love that is inseparable with loving our brothers and sisters. As such, living consecrated celibacy requires the inevitable work of integrating one's own affective life into the celibate life

To integrate the human experience of being sexual and the experience of grace and love of virginity continues to constitute the greatest challenge of the celibate life. The challenge is always present and is lived in a precise social context. It will be necessary to break with the tradition that has spurned the body, has feared and distrusted women, and has repressed sexuality. More precisely it will be to encourage a greater harmony with contemporary culture without ever dispensing from evangelical prophecy. It is necessary to search more for harmony, beauty, fullness, than renouncement, obligation and perfection. And we need to follow more closely cultural movements so as to perceive the density of human sexuality, not simply oriented toward procreation, but also toward communication, relationship, and love.

(THOMAS J. STEHLIK, C.M., translator)