



*From the editor: This epistolary examination of the call to lifelong celibacy, such as is embraced by monks and nuns, centres upon the character of that calling as a spiritual gift. An understanding of the proper Christian view of celibacy is ever more important in a world that continues to accord it less and less value, and view it more frequently than not as aberrational.*

The notion of celibacy is one hard for the modern mind to understand, still less to appreciate. To what end might a man or woman rebuke (so it seems to many) the rich gift of the married life? For what reason might the human person embark upon a life that seems to 'fail to appreciate' the marvel of this type of precious relationship? Since many stumble at the weight of these and similar questions, so do many dismiss all together that 'other' way of life whose motivations seem so foreign, so unapproachable. In the conceptual struggle of contemporary man to comprehend a manner of living divergent from the 'mainstream' with which he is familiar, that whole way of life is all too often dismissed with the arguments that seem unable to support or defend it. Little does this modern man, who prides himself on the breadth of his understanding and the scope of his embracing acceptance, realise how truly closed his mind can be. Following the example of millions throughout history who have shunned and disparaged that which is not understood or personally appreciated, modern man regards the notion of celibacy as flawed, defective, at its core a distortion of the good and the fullness of human life.

There is little we can do to change this view which predominates in the contemporary world. A people that closes its eyes and stops up its ears to the unfamiliar will not be swayed by many words or patterned arguments. It is possible to have ears, but not to hear; to have eyes, but not to see. Understanding cannot be forced. Changes of heart come more gradually, more

mystically. But we may, we must, reinforce in ourselves the understanding of realities which the world around us may not accept. There is a higher judge, a far greater standard, than the opinions of the society of men. When we live according to the truth of His standard, then shall the world come gradually to see through our lives what it might not otherwise accept from our lips.

And so with the calling of celibacy, we must not permit our hearts to be turned by a world which accords it no value. We must understand and always appreciate, cherish, the breadth of the love of God which gives divergent gifts to His precious children. And here the heart of our mystery: gift. As much as the blessing of the sacramental married life is known so to be, so must we come to understand, first of all, that the celibate life is, too, a gift. Only when it is so approached, only when it is so conceived, can it properly be comprehended. The heart of Christ, which accords all men their spiritual gifts through the person of the Holy Spirit, is the true source of the celibate vocation. Spiritual things come only from the Spirit, and a divine gift is always something given, when and to whom God Himself wills. To call celibacy a gift is to affirm that which is all too often forgotten in contemporary life: that it has its root and source in the divine life of God—that it has its manifestation in the person of such an individual as this same God has created, chosen, and formed to journey into the Kingdom by such a way.

From the holy voices of the Fathers of the Church we have been taught, time and time again, that this life, this calling, is not for all. Saint Paul, himself a great lover of the celibate way, affirms nothing less when he says: 'I wish that all men were even as I myself'—that is, that all could be celibate. But then he quickly adds, 'But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that' ([1 Cor 7.7](#)). Only those to whom God has given this gift may truly possess it, and only such a one should endeavour to embrace it personally. Just as a man who has not been given the gift of prophecy will never be a prophet, and as a woman who has not been given the gift of visions will never be a seer, so the individual who has not been given the gift of celibacy will never truly be a celibate. It is a holy way of life, but it is not the exclusive way of life. It is a gift given to some through the love of God, which neither debases nor exalts them in relation to their brethren to whom God has given the gift of the call to marriage. God's gifts are not to be 'rated'. All are holy blessings.

In appreciating this reality of celibacy as a spiritual gift, we are able to address and to quell in our hearts many of the concerns the world bears toward this life. First, and perhaps the most insidious among the views of the world, is the belief that the way of celibacy stands in judgement of the way of marriage. There is fear in our contemporary culture, that an acceptance of the notion of celibacy equates to an acceptance of a tacit devaluation of marriage—that the celibate man looks spitefully on his married brother and the celibate woman scorns her married sister. But it is the world, not the holy Church, which approaches our topic with such an 'either-or' attitude; for how can one who truly views both the married and celibate ways as gifts

of one and the same loving God, set one in opposition to the other? How can he be serious of his faith, who would receive one gift from Christ, but call another evil? No, the value and sanctity of all things is in the Giver, who by His radiant energies makes all gifts holy. Celibacy and marriage both have their essence in Him who draws all things to life. How striking to our expectations that some of the most poignant phrases ever composed in support of and love for the married way, have come from the pens of celibate monks, nuns and Apostles. Such individuals know how deep, convicting and abiding God's gifts may be within a human life, and how precious can be that embodiment of Trinitarian love that is made manifest in the gift of Christian marriage. But they magnify a gift they know is not their own. Their own life is rooted in a different gift, another way, and it is this gift that receives the personal love of their own hearts.

Saint Paul, the great Apostle, taught us well concerning the varieties of spiritual gifts, that they are numerous, divergent, yet all precious and divinely personal. He himself received the wondrous and exceptional gift of the apostolate and therefore was in a position, it might be thought, to place one gift above another in the manner that some gifts bring authority over the exercise of others (cf. {bible}1 Cor 12:1-31{/bible}). But it is our same Saint Paul who reminds us of the inherent value of all the gifts of the Lord, precisely because they are gifts of the Lord. Because we know to call celibacy a gift, so we know not to use it in judgement of other gifts. The world which sees in Christian celibacy a despisal of the married way, sees but the illusion of its own misunderstanding.

Secondly, our understanding of celibacy as a gift helps us to appreciate the fact that this life is not a negative, but a positive calling. All too often is celibacy described in terms of negation: the celibate is one who 'lacks' a spouse, who 'goes without' marriage, who 'suffers the absence' of a partner. But gifts are not matters of negation, they are rooted in the active receipt of otherwise un-possessed blessings. Celibacy is only a negative state when viewed from one, specific angle. How often does modern man stop to think of celibacy, even attempt to think of celibacy, as the embracing of a different kind of positive? Perhaps never, certainly not often; and yet this is the very message of celibacy as gift. The celibate man may live without a wife, but he possesses the great gift of being wed solely to Christ, of having none for the object of his intimate love than his own Creator. She who lives in celibate devotion to God vests herself in the same manner of life embraced by the Son who walked on this earth with neither spouse nor mate, yet wed Himself to all the world as the perfect Bridegroom for a waiting bride. Are not such things positive, not states of deprivation but of rich fulfilment? The celibate does not see his life predominantly as one of 'going without', but one of going with Christ in a different way. Yes, there are sacrifices made, oftentimes severe in form and nature, but this is no less true in a holy marriage. In the requirement of great sacrifice, the callings are the same. Their distinction lies in the manner, not the quantity, of the offering. Only when we are truly, deeply biased, do we fail to see that both gifts require tremendous personal sacrifice, yet from and through this sacrifice grant many rich blessings.

The celibate's call is to walk toward Christ in a different manner than his married brother. Due to the unsearchable wisdom and love of God, he is called to a type of journey into the Kingdom that is more socially solitary—but he is never alone. The celibate, too, believes that 'it is not good for man to be alone'; but let us not be so naive and closed-minded as to think that marriage is the only way to be 'together'. The celibate joins himself to the world in a relationship of no single intimate union with another, that through his one union with Christ, and through Him the Spirit and the Father, he may be lover and companion to all. It is a very different call than to the blessed state of marriage; but a call is always, by its nature, social.

Celibacy is a positive calling, and we are reminded of this when we appreciate its nature as divine gift. We find here, too, reassurance of the fullness of life to be had in such a calling. Society may be eager to decry the celibate way as one in which the individual 'misses out' on the fullness of life attainable in marriage, but in so doing, our modern world only shows more clearly its failure to understand the nature of the gifts of God as effective personal realities. The richness, the wholeness and the completeness of life do not come from the adherence to any social or relational model: they come from personal union with God. Such union is always and only available to man through the gifts given him by our precious and loving Lord; and so individual fullness comes from realising, embracing and fostering within us the gifts we, and not any other, have received. Many receive the gift of the married vocation, and to these the richness of union with God comes, in part, through that gift's actualisation in a holy and sanctified marriage. Not to embrace the gift is to wage battle with God, who knows better than man what life is most suited to him. And this same concept is equally true of him who has received the gift of celibacy: only in the gift's embrace will such a person ever truly know the richness and fullness of life as God has set it before him. No other way shall ever satisfy the longing in his heart, even if that other way is that which brings fulfilment and union to a hundred million others. It is not his way. To live a celibate life is, for the one who has received this gift, the context of his journey into union with God.

Our life in Christ is the true soul of our being as human persons. We live in Him through His coming to us as man—the divine Man to whose life we were joined when, through the mystical power of the Holy Trinity, we were baptised in the same waters that flowed over His own flesh and sealed with the same Spirit that soared over the creation formed in Him. It is to this life that we must attend with all diligence and care, working to attain the discernment that will enable us to see and to recognise the unique and precious gifts God has given to each of us personally as His own priceless children. Let us never succumb to societal pressures that would have us walk one way or another based upon the comforts and preferences of a troubled world. Let us never be swayed into judging or pre-determining the gifts of God, which only He has the right to determine and give. We must find in ourselves the light of Christ which calls us toward Himself, and see through its illumination the path by which He calls us to His side. Whether it be by the celibate or married way, our response should be only joy—and great joy at this. How can we do anything but rejoice when our Maker shows us the road which He has fashioned especially between us and Him? Shall we once again take from the Tree of Life the fruit that seems

sweetest to our senses, rather than the food sprung forth specifically for our growth and sanctification? May our societally-induced 'preferences' never cause us to scorn our gift through longing for another. May God give to us the patience and the openness to discern which gift we have been given; and when we have found it, to follow Him in that gift. If we are thus faithful to Him and Him alone, surely our wise Lord will bless our lives with richness beyond imagining and fullness beyond expectation; for He is a good and loving God who knows and desires what is best for His children.

May we always have His blessing.