

The Source of Vocations

Isaiah 58:7-10
Psalm 112
1 Corinthians 2:1-5
Matthew 5:13-16

A little more than a month ago, I was scheduled to teach an open “question and answer” class at RCIA. The morning of the class, I prayed and asked God to help me listen attentively to the questions that would be asked; I have a tendency to hear part of a question or to misunderstand the question and launch into a lengthy soliloquy that isn’t very helpful. I knew I needed God’s help.

The very first question that was asked during the class was about celibacy. At first, I didn’t know if the person was being serious or not, but I asked God to help me to hear what was really being asked. As I stumbled clumsily through an answer I realized what God wanted me to hear—He was inviting me to reflect on the gift of celibacy in my life.

In prayer the next morning, I realized that I had not spent quality and quantity time in my priesthood reflecting on and praying about the gift of celibacy. Just as it would be foolish for a married person to never take time to reflect on the sacramental nature of their marriage, I realized that I should not neglect reflecting on the gift of celibacy. For the last month, I have been reflecting on celibacy, and consequently on marriage, during my prayer time, as well as reading the Theology of the Body by Pope John Paul II.

From September 1979 to November 1984, Pope John Paul II wrote 129 short talks that have come to be known as the Theology of the Body. The starting place for these talks were the Gospel of Matthew, chapter nineteen, and the two creation stories from the beginning of the book of Genesis. In those Scripture verses, we find the foundation for every authentic vocation. In the upcoming weeks, we will look at some of the important concepts and teachings in these Scripture verses as they relate to our vocations. Today, we will go through these verses slowly and set the stage for the upcoming sermons. So, let’s begin where the Pope began—chapter 19 in the Gospel of Matthew.

When Jesus finished these words, he left Galilee and went to the district of Judea across the Jordan. Great crowds followed him, and he cured them there. Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?” He said in reply, “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” They said to him, “Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss (her)?” He said to them, “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery.”

[His] disciples said to him, “If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” He answered, “Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted. Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.”

-Matthew 19: 1-12

The first thing we should note in this text is Jesus' use of the phrase, "from the beginning" (Matthew 19:4, 8). Jesus is explaining that something has changed in human history that is not good and that we need to go back to the way it was originally. He then explains precisely the "beginning" that He is talking about—the creation stories in the book of Genesis. He quotes the first creation story, explaining that God created humanity "male and female" (Matthew 19:4) and then He quotes the second creation story, saying, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Matthew 19:5). Jesus is making it very clear that if we want to understand marriage, we need to revisit the creation stories and come to understand marriage as it was "from the beginning."

When the Pharisees pointed out to Jesus that Moses had allowed divorce, Jesus explained to them that it was only because of the hardness of their hearts and that, once again, divorce was not a part of how things were "from the beginning." Jesus then gives a very difficult teaching, saying, "Whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another, commits adultery" (Matthew 19:9). The phrase "unless the marriage is unlawful" is understood by the Church to mean that the marriage is invalid and has been declared null. The reason why we have the annulment process in the Catholic Church is to honor this difficult teaching.

Apparently, Jesus' disciples understood the tremendous weight of this teaching. They immediately decided that it would be easier and better for someone to avoid marriage rather than risk divorcing. Jesus' response is really interesting. He answered, "Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted" (Matthew 19:11). In other words, Jesus confirms that the disciples' idea about celibacy is not a bad idea, but that it is a gift that some are granted and others are not. This leads to Jesus further clarifying the vocation of celibacy.

In verse twelve, Jesus explained that there are some people who are incapable of getting married and procreating because they were born with a birth defect. Then, He further explained that there are some who are incapable because they were physically mutilated. Lastly, Jesus explained that there are some people who renounce marriage "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12b). This is the basis for every celibate vocation.

In these twelve verses, Jesus gives us the two sides of the vocation coin—marriage and celibacy for the kingdom of heaven. Now, some of you might be asking where the single life falls into this teaching. Jesus makes no reference to the single life in these passages, but I think it is justifiable to say that every single person is being called to one of the vocations that Jesus mentioned. There are some single people who are in the process of being prepared for marriage, especially through their physical, emotional, and spiritual growth, as well as through dating. There are other single people, however, who have consecrated themselves to celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, even though they are not part of a religious community. They do not actively date and they don't intend to get married.

In order to further set the stage for future sermons, let's take a quick look at the two creation stories that Jesus quoted. It's important for us to remember that these creation stories are not meant to be historical accounts of what happened thousands of years ago, but rather, they are anthropological and theological understandings of humanity. They help us to understand who we are, who God is, and what our relationship is with Him and one another.

I'm not going to read both creation accounts, but I do want to point out a few important parts. In the first account, we are told that God created humanity in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) and gave us dominion over all the earth. It also explains that there is a distinction in humanity known as "male and female." In verse 28 we read that God commanded man and woman to "Be fertile and multiply," and to "fill the earth and subdue it." The last thing mentioned in the first creation story is that "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good."

The second creation story differs significantly from the first story. For example, we are told that God created man "out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). Whereas in the first creation story, man and woman were created at the same time, in

the second story, man was created first. We are told that the man, Adam, was placed in the Garden of Eden to “cultivate and care for it” (Genesis 2:15). God noticed that Adam was alone and said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him” (Genesis 2:18). What followed was the creation of all of the animals of the earth, but none of them provided a suitable partner for Adam. Through the process of naming all of the animals, Adam himself became aware of his solitude. This seemed to breed a new self-awareness and an awareness of his loneliness. And so, we are told that God, “cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man” (Genesis 2:21-22a). Adam called the new creature, Eve, and joyfully testified that she was his equal and a suitable partner. So suitable, in fact, that Adam and Eve understood their relationship to be an intimate union where the “two of them [became] one body” (Genesis 2:24). Lastly, we are told that Adam and Eve were both naked, yet they did not experience any shame (Genesis 2:25).

As Pope John Paul II proves in his Theology of the Body, these two creation stories hold a huge wealth of material for coming to better understand the vocations of marriage and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. These stories which Jesus highlighted as important, show us numerous things that we will be covering in the upcoming weeks, such as—the sacramental nature of marriage, the role of solitude in our lives, the importance of celibacy, the complimentary natures of marriage and celibacy, and the persistent and destructive nature of lust. In preparation for the upcoming sermons, I encourage all of us to spend some time reflecting on these Scripture verses and reflect on our own vocation story.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ As you slowly read over Matthew 19:1-12 and Genesis 1:26-2:25, think about your own vocation. What was it like in the beginning? How has it changed? Where do you struggle the most? How does your vocation help you the most to experience human love? How does your vocation help you to most experience God’s love?