

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS 101

Celibacy

It is amazing how many people, with their heads tilted slightly to the side and with looks of sadness and pity upon their faces, have come up to me and said, "I'm so sorry you can't get married." While they think they are offering words of consolation, they are, in fact, ignorantly demeaning the life-long commitment of priests and religious throughout the world.

One of the most misunderstood aspects of Roman Catholicism is its tradition of celibate clergy and religious.¹ Many people mistakenly believe that the Church is trying to convince the world that only celibate clergy can properly minister. That, of course, is not the case. Rather, celibate clergy and religious offer to the world a very unique perspective on what it means to follow Christ and to serve the Body of Christ.

Jesus, as well as many of his disciples, demonstrated their love for many people through a celibate lifestyle. One very obvious teaching about celibacy is found in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus had just finished teaching his disciples about the sanctity of marriage, when he turned his attention to the role of the eunuch. A eunuch is a man who cannot procreate.

The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry." But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it."

-Matthew 19:10-12

Priests and religious have consciously chosen to be celibate for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. God first called them to celibacy, and then He called them to ministry. So, how is celibacy beneficial to the kingdom of heaven?

First, the celibate lifestyle offers a person a tremendous freedom to focus on loving and serving *many* people. Married people have an obligation to take care of their spouses and children; celibates, on the other hand, can focus their time, energy, and prayer towards many people.

Celibacy is also important for the kingdom since it reminds people that Jesus is coming again. Saint Paul stated in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Now concerning the unmarried... I think that in view of the present distress it is well for a person to remain as he is" (1 Cor. 7:25-26). When Paul mentions the "present distress," he is alluding to the persecutions that Christians were enduring as well as the belief that Christ would return soon. We know neither the day nor the hour of Christ's return, but we need to be reminded that our attention should be on heavenly things and not earthly things. Celibacy offers this reminder.

Lastly, celibacy reminds our sex-saturated culture that there is indeed more to life than sex. In reality, this might be the most important message that celibacy has to offer to the 21st century. Everything in the media tells us that to be fully human and fully alive requires us to be promiscuous and unfaithful. Celibacy offers a soft, but strong voice that says, "Love is greater than lust."

While celibacy is not required for effective ministry (I have many married friends who are very effective ministers), it does offer an important message about love and service. It is a gift from God. As a priest, I am thankful for celibacy and not at all sorry.

¹ Celibacy literally means to refrain from marriage. Based on the gift of chastity, celibacy, then, also means refraining from sex.