

why celibacy

by Sr. Rachel Duffy

Sr. Rachel Duffy is a Catholic religious sister from Preston, Lancashire, England. She took her final vows in 1976 as a member of the Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ), an international religious congregation of women. A teacher by profession, she came to the Philippines in 1988 and is now involved in a programme for the education and wellbeing of working children whose family livelihood is scavenging and recycling garbage. Sr. Rachel is also responsible for accompanying the young Filipino women who are joining the FCJ congregation, as they prepare for commitment in this way of life. WIA solicited her views on celibacy, a fundamental issue in discussing women's sexuality, and one on which the Catholic church takes a very strong position.

Until the 1960s, it was a commonly held assumption in the Roman Catholic Church that committing oneself to a celibate life of prayer and service in a religious community was objectively superior to any other life project.

And as recently as 1996, Pope John Paul II released a message to the whole Church—*Vita Consecrata*, or Consecrated Life—saying that “the Church has always taught the preeminence of perfect chastity for the sake of the Kingdom” and that this way of life “which mirrors Christ’s own way of life, has an objective superiority.” That was the English translation. The French and Italian translations did tone it down just a little, as “objective excellence,” but the implication of a celibate life’s being better than other ways of life cannot be avoided.

It is worth noting, though, that it is not celibacy in itself that is being valued, but celibacy for the “sake of the Kingdom” which in ordinary language means for the sake of trying to bring into reality a vision of the world as it *could* be if we took seriously the Christian ideal of universal brotherhood and sisterhood. It is unfortunate when church teaching

affirms one life option at the expense of others, engaging in comparisons which imply a put-down of other people’s life options.

It is also unfortunate, if understandable, when centuries of accumulated unconscious fears, hang-ups and suspicion associated with sexuality are still alive and well. It’s hard to say which comes first, the chicken or the egg, but we can see that unhealthy attitudes to sexuality will lead to a desire to exalt celibacy as if it were a value in itself; while too much singing the praises of “perfect chastity” will imply that sexual activity is something unhealthy or even unclean. The traditional word “chastity” carries associations with purity and cleanliness, unconsciously giving the message, on the one hand, that sexuality is somehow unwholesome, and on the other hand tending to stereotype all celibate women as cold, repressed, and antiseptic in their relationships with others.

In the sixties, the second Vatican Council attempted to level the field, affirming that all of us are invited to one and the same holiness of life, and this awareness now seems to be well rooted in the minds and imaginations of educated Catholics. This

does not mean to say, though, that the conscious and unconscious fears, prejudices and suspicions associated with sexuality have all disappeared from the Roman Catholic Church.

CELIBACY: Sexual singleness which can mean “an affirmation of autonomy and independence.” (Sona Osma 1983, 28) Source: *Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary, 1992*

Its priests are obliged to live a celibate life. Celibacy does not belong *essentially* to the nature of the priestly life and has not always been a requirement for priests throughout the whole of the history of this Church, though the present Pope has asserted that the Church has not the authority to make a change in this matter.

The traditional word “chastity” carries associations with purity and cleanliness, unconsciously giving the message, on the one hand, that sexuality is somehow unwholesome, and on the other hand tending to stereotype all celibate women as cold, repressed, and antiseptic in their relationships with others.

The barring of married men from the priesthood and the total exclusion of women disturb members at all levels, and certainly there is not a unity of opinion in the Church on these issues at the present time. Being a woman is officially considered incompatible with the identification with Jesus which is involved in priesthood, suggesting that it is the maleness of Jesus which is considered to be of more significance than the humanness which is shared by male and female alike.

In the Church we often hear about “the role of women” but not “the role of men,” revealing the assumption that maleness is the norm from which femaleness deviates. Efforts therefore need to be made to figure out quite where women fit into the picture!

There is still much evolution to take place in the Church before it becomes an institution friendly to and respectful of women as fully human and fully Christian. Some official declarations have been made to encourage women’s participation in decision making in the Church, but it remains very much a man’s world in its structures of authority and leadership.

When invited to write this article I was asked, “Why does the Church impose celibacy?” In the case of women (or men) who belong to religious communities in the Roman Catholic Church, it is not really accurate to say that celibacy is imposed on them. Sometimes there are movements in support of married clergy or women’s ordination, but there

are no movements campaigning for married religious sisters, religious brothers, or priest-members of religious communities. It would be a contradiction in terms, for celibacy is something *inherent* in this way of giving one’s life to God.

I would like to affirm that the commitment to celibacy in a religious congregation is a deliberate choice, not an imposition; that it has a positive value and can be empowering. No one is *obliged* to choose it, as Catholics are as free as anyone else to organise themselves in any kind of association they wish, with or without celibacy, and just get on with it. No one nowadays is forced into religious life, yet some women who have other attractive options still find it good to belong to a body of women united by a lifelong commitment to a common vision inspired by the Christian gospel; united by shared ideals which are more attainable together than alone; and united especially by each one’s personal experience of relationship with God, God as made known in the human face of a certain Jesus of Nazareth, who did not experience marriage or parenthood, yet certainly was a loving and loved human being, ready to give his life for others, on a daily basis as well as in the ultimate sense.

What motivates women to choose a life where a celibate commitment is central? Undeniably there is plenty of scope for unhealthy motivations such as all kinds of unconscious fears, and unrealistic and romanticised expectations of oneself and of religious life. For this reason, responsible groups require a careful psychological assessment of applicants and are in no hurry to accept everyone who shows an interest.

But my purpose is to reflect on the possibility of healthy, mature and life-giving motivations for such a choice. The phenomenon of active religious life—i.e., active solidarity with people in any kind of need—as it has evolved in the last two centuries has accumulated a wealth of experience of celibate living. Of course there have been some aberrations. But much of this experience demonstrates, by the example of the lives of numerous individuals, that celibate living at its best is entirely compatible with the unfolding of a warm and balanced personality in a life where one’s gifts and talents can be well developed and given very full scope. This has relevance for all women who, whether by choice or circumstance, are celibate.

CHASTITY: A sexual innocence demanded of young women but not of young men who “are expected to chase women and if they can to seduce them; the women being classed as ‘fair game.’” (Shirley Ardener, 1978, 36)

Source: *Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary, 1992*

What about the negative side of celibacy, an absence of natural fulfillment? Our natural human instincts draw us to desire a loving partner, a life together, children and grandchildren. Never to know these precious experiences of human life is, of course, a real loss. To integrate this loss, as far as I know from personal experience and that of others, calls for attentiveness to the spiritual dimension involved in being a human being.

Celibacy creates a vacuum which God does not fill. God can never be to us a substitute for a spouse or a child, but only God. The vacuum can be filled by material comforts, work and achievement, or dulled by TV and trivial pastimes. Better, the vacuum can be allowed to remain unfilled. This leads us to the all-important role of prayer in the life of one who is celibate out of a spiritual motivation. Prayer is the readiness to stay with that vacuum, just as when a loved one is physically absent, nothing can fill the gap, but somehow it is important to leave the gap unfilled, as it is that very gap which keeps the loved one present to our mind and heart.

Leaving the vacuum unfilled fosters the search for the deeper source of our lives, however we image that according to our religious faith, experience and intuitive wisdom. All of us, faced with the experience that even the most beloved partner or child can never be everything to us, are engaged in this search. St. Augustine's: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you," if true, is true for everybody.

Being celibate can help to widen our horizons. It can highlight and deepen awareness that we are all responsible for each other. Whether a child is ours or not makes no difference. What is significant is if the child is in need and if I have the power to do something about that. "I would like to do more but I cannot because I must think of my responsibilities to my own family" is not the case.

No one healthily opts for celibacy for its own sake, as if it were a value in itself, which as a negative thing it cannot be. What we opt for is the possibility of devoting our energy, talents, capacity for loving, where they can most be of service, where they are most needed.

A single woman with the strength of a highly committed group beside her and behind her, is in a privileged position of freedom to discern: "Is where I am now and what I am doing the place and the activity where I can make my fullest contribution?" When this woman chooses religious life it is not because she has a great desire to be celibate or that she doesn't value normal human relationships. It's rather that she cares enough to be ready to sacrifice

one level of fulfillment for the sake of the consequent freedom to look at a wider horizon of the world's needs and discern where to devote her energy, talents and capacity for love. There is a great strength in belonging to a group where all the members want to do this, and not just as isolated individuals but as a group.

All kinds of groups are inspired by a conviction of universal kinship and a willingness to expend themselves for the well-being of someone else. It is by no means a monopoly of celibate people. It is also worth mentioning that there is a movement in lots of religious congregations today to widen the scope of membership, and to work out a new form of commitment for people who do not feel drawn to a lifelong or celibate commitment but who like what they find in the religious group: the dimension of community, of spirituality, resources to initiate and sustain imaginative and practical projects of solidarity with materially deprived or marginalised people. Such people would like a looser form of membership so as to share in the "mission" of the group for a certain period of time. Many religious congregations are beginning to experiment with this model.

To affirm one life option should not be to negate others. Two highly motivated and dedicated people, for example, may discover that their love for one another leads to marriage or some form of committed sexual relationship, and find in it greater support and inspiration to persevere in making the best contribution they can to life through generously sharing their talents and particular field of expertise. And among the best gifts they could offer to life might well be their own children.

Love is not a limited commodity, as if one will have less to give to the wider community if one gives to partner and children. One might even have *more* to give. There are many ways to do the same thing—love people and try to make the fullest contribution we can to the world during the short time that we are passing through it.

The point I am making is simply that celibacy, too, can be empowering if it is part of an option for loving people and giving of one's best for them and with them. Far from being developmentally destructive it can facilitate a person's full development as a human being who does not love possessively. ♡

*Sr. Rachel Duffy, Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus
34 Doña Maria St., Don Jose Heights, Quezon City
1122, Philippines, Tel (632) 428-2486, Tel/Fax (632)
416-8155, E-mail:fcjdjose@csi.com.ph, Website:
www.fcjsisters.org*