



# ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

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## RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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### “Priest as Bridegroom: Chaste-Celibacy Today”

Tonight I am going to speak about the identity of the priest as the bridegroom of the Church. These thoughts are not being offered as if you have not heard them before, but it is good to regularly reflect upon the reality of our own chaste-celibate commitment, and as your process of discernment and formation continues hopefully you find new meaning each time you hear and assimilate the nuances more deeply. This conference is also a follow-up from the chaste celibacy workshop two months ago and the last Rector's conference on spiritual friendship. From the cross, Christ consummated his spousal union with the Church. As we look upon our new crucifix we can hear the words *consumatum est* – “it is finished” – “it is consummated” (Jn. 19:30). He showed Himself to be the Head, Shepherd, and Spouse of the Church in his ultimate act of love: “laying down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). Our Lord models the great mystery of which St. Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 5: “Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and lay down his life for her. [...] This is a great mystery [... which] refers to Christ and the Church” (vv. 25 and 32).

Canon 277 §1 positively states the canonical requirement of continence and celibacy for clergy: “Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are bound to celibacy which is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with undivided heart and are able to dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and humanity.” Notice the distinction made between the words “perfect continence” and “celibacy”, granted this distinction in our lives should be nominal, but it is important to emphasize both. “Perfect continence” means that one refrains from sexual relations for the whole of one's life, and the word “celibacy” simply means that one refrains from marriage. The Church wants “to be perfectly clear” that we understand that we are not simply staying single, but that we do so in such a way that we “renounce sex perpetually for the sake for the Kingdom.” In times past, an unhealthy view of priesthood might have seen celibacy as solely remaining unmarried, while at the same time, being able to fool around on the side – in other words to have “friends with benefits.” This is quite obviously an abuse – after all, James Bond is celibate – but that is not the lifestyle to which we are called by Our Lord. Let *me* be perfectly clear: “the celibacy of clerics does not entail only an unmarried lifestyle. In order for the gift of celibacy to achieve its theological and canonical purpose, celibacy must be joined with perfect and perpetual continence.”<sup>1</sup> *Optatam Totius* emphasized the importance of seminarians being instructed that they are to dedicate their whole body, mind, and soul completely to the Lord (cf. *OT* 10). In *Evangelii Gadium* Pope Francis reminds us that once we realize the depths of God's love for us, this “conviction enables us to maintain a spirit of joy

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<sup>1</sup> Remigiusz S. Blaszkowski, “Mutual Rights and Obligations of Bishops and Priests Regarding the Observance of Perfect Continence and Celibacy,” JCL Thesis (CUA: Washington, D.C., 2012), 34.

in the midst of a task so demanding and challenging that it engages our entire life. God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us” (EG 12).

Tonight let us reflect upon the sacrifice that we offer through our gift of celibacy – a beautiful sacrifice we offer in order to be more fully united to Christ and our Bride the Church. The Congregation for Catholic Education wrote: “Priestly celibacy is not simply to be identified with remaining unmarried or with sexual continence. It is a renunciation of three natural tendencies: genital function, conjugal love, and natural fatherhood, made ‘for the love of the kingdom of heaven.’ To be a genuine and sincere witness to religious values, it can never be a negation of, or a flight from, sex, but rather it must be a sublimation of sexuality” (“A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy” [1974], 47). We must be in touch with our masculine identity if these offerings are truly to become sacrificial. As the document from the Congregation states: “Celibacy transcends the natural order and involves a total personal commitment. It cannot be maintained except with God’s grace. More than a mere law of the Church, celibacy must be understood as a ‘qualification’ which receives added value because it is publicly offered in the presence of the whole Church. Celibacy is an offering, an oblation, a real and true sacrifice, not merely giving up of the sacrament of Marriage, for the sake of the Kingdom” (ibid., 9).

We often say that celibacy is a gift, but we need to reflect more on the value of that gift. It is a gift that must be prayed for in order to be received. While this is true we also must regularly die to self and our own natural desires. This entails embracing the cross and a life of self-sacrifice. As mentioned above, it is a death to genital sexuality, a death to the beauty of conjugal love, and a death to natural fatherhood. We need not be afraid of the Cross in our lives as we walk with Christ on a daily basis. It is He who calls us and it is He who will give us the strength to fulfill the call. We should desire marriage on the natural level, because if we do not, then we cannot offer it up as a sacrifice like Christ as a gift to our Bride. The fruit of this gift is ever greater pastoral charity – a gift of self freely offered up for others. “Grace builds on nature and perfects it” – God does not ask us to do something that he does not give us the commensurate grace to do.

While the celibate calling takes a great deal of grace, it is predicated on self-knowledge and self-discipline. According to Msgr. Stephen Rossetti there are three questions that each of us should be able to answer:

- 1) Do I know who I am sexually?
- 2) Do I live in peace with my sexuality?
- 3) Can I express my sexuality in a life-giving, chaste manner? (cf. *Seminarium* 47 [2007]: 776).

These are important questions and I would say essential and crucial questions that each of us needs to answer. Regarding the first question, “Do I know who I am sexually?” especially in light of Dr. Kleponis’ presentation and the feedback I received on the topic of same sex attraction, I wish to offer the following clarifications based on the 2005 Instruction from the Congregation of Catholic Education entitled “[Homosexuality and Priesthood: The Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations](#).” There is nothing new in this document as it clarifies the three clear criteria regarding those to be admitted into the seminary and ultimately to Holy Orders. According to the instruction, those men who are not suitable for ordination are: 1) “Practicing homosexuality”; 2) “present deep-seated homosexual tendencies”;

and/or 3) “support the so-called gay culture.”<sup>2</sup> First of all, each of us who are called to the priesthood are asked to embrace the discipline of chaste celibacy through perfect and perpetual continence, so anyone who is not living such a life is not fit for ordination. “Acting out” is acting out and thus this person cannot be ordained. Secondly, it is important for the man to be able to understand himself as a man called to give himself to his bride and to truly be a spiritual father – this is essential if one is to stand *in persona Christi*. Thirdly, can each of us fully embrace the teachings of the Church regarding human sexuality and faithfully and wholeheartedly teach them? The man who feels the need to self identify and define his very self with a same sex attraction is the person to whom the Instruction is referring. Such a man may also become an advocate for a way of life that the Church does not endorse. At the same time, it is inappropriate to foster a homophobic atmosphere in the Church or for that matter in the seminary when none of us knows the thoughts and struggles of another person. We must be aware of harshly judging our brothers for we cannot know their whole story. As the Holy Father stated, “who am I to judge?” (cf. Pope Francis and the interview on the flight back from WYD). Each individual’s path is part of a careful discernment with his bishop, spiritual director, and others journeying with him. However as priests, we must recognize that we must strive not to draw attention to ourselves: whether by overly effeminate characteristics, or for that matter, an imbalanced machismo attitude that can be equally off-putting. I have known many good and holy married men and priests who possessed effeminate mannerisms who were 100% totally faithful and dedicated to their vocations. We must desire simply to be men of God who act as bridges to manifest the love of God.

Again, the question for each of us to ask ourselves: Do I live in peace with my own sexuality? We are to know ourselves, surrender our sexual desires and fantasies, and allow the Lord to transform our *eros* into a true *agape*. The Lord certainly wants us to live in peace as we give ourselves fully to our spiritual family. Remember Our Lord wants us to have life in abundance (cf. Jn. 10:10). Our whole life is aimed towards union with Christ, and our mission is to minister through pastoral charity to those entrusted to our care. Please realize that our chaste and celibate calling is linked to our life-giving mission and is a “wellspring for pastoral effectiveness.”<sup>3</sup> Pope John Paul II states it well in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “Pastoral charity is the virtue by which we imitate Christ in his self-giving and service. It is not just what we do, but our gift of self, which manifests Christ’s love for his flock. Pastoral charity determines our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people. It makes special demands on us” (*PDV* 23). As you have heard me quote our late Holy Father numerous times, we are to be bridges for humanity and not obstacles (cf. *PDV* 43). In order to do so we are to be “able to know the depths of the human heart, to perceive difficulties and problems, to make the meeting and dialogue easy, to create trust and cooperation, to express serene and objective judgments” (*ibid.*). Can we relate equally and

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<sup>2</sup> For a deeper commentary on this document, see Earl K. Fernandez, *Seminary Formation and Homosexuality* (IPF Publications: Omaha, 2013). “This book examines comments by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in *Light of the World* regarding the recent Vatican instruction *Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders*, which deals with homosexuality and the priesthood. This book demonstrates that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s comments on this issue have been consistent both within his pontificate and while he held office at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. As sexual *mores* have changed in the culture, attempting to ‘normalize’ homosexuality, the Church has developed guidelines for seminary formators, culminating in the instruction upon which Benedict commented” (from the book review on the IPF Publications website [www.priestlyformation.org/resources/ipf-publications/](http://www.priestlyformation.org/resources/ipf-publications/)).

<sup>3</sup> *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests: New Edition* (Congregation for the Clergy: Vatican City State, 2013), 80 (cf. also, 79-82 for an excellent treatise on celibacy).

effectively to both men and women? Is celibacy life-giving and do I live it in a beautifully chaste and holy manner of life? Pope Francis repeatedly states, as did his predecessors, that we cannot live a double life.

I believe the identity of the priest as chaste spouse is one of the least understood aspects of the identity of the priest, yet one of the most essential in today's world. The priest is not a bachelor, but a man in a vowed and committed relationship, espoused to the Bride of Christ. St. Paul writes of the way in which spousal love is meant to be lived:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So (also) husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body (*Ephesians 5:25-30*).

Husbands, love your wives. This death to self is an entering into the Paschal Mystery. As men, we are naturally called to give ourselves to a woman. In our case, it is a call to spiritual spousality to the Bride of Christ, the Church. This is not un-natural, it is super-natural. The natural analogy of marriage used for the priest and the Church is in no way fictitious, but in truth it is the “really real.” For in actuality, the sacrament of Matrimony is the foreshadowing of the marriage of Christ and the Church (cf. *Ephesians 5*) into which the priest enters *in persona Christi*. The supernatural marriage of the priest to the Church is the real prefigurement of the heavenly kingdom where “we will neither be married nor given in marriage” (*Mark 12:25*).

Pope John Paul II wrote that “[t]he priest is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, the Spouse of the Church” (*PDV 22*). Our late Holy Father had a particular affinity for this image of the priest as bridegroom. “Therefore, the priest’s life ought to radiate this spousal character which demands that he be a witness to Christ’s spousal love, and thus be capable of loving people with a heart which is new, generous and pure, with genuine self-detachment, with full, constant and faithful dedication [...]” (*PDV 22*). John Paul continued, “The Church as the Spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her Head and Spouse loved her. Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self *in* and *with* Christ *to* his Church and expresses the priest’s service to the Church and in the world” (*PDV 29*).

It is important to understand that we do not live as bachelors. The priest who has the mindset that he is in a permanent relationship with Christ and His Church will not live as a bachelor or absentee-father; rather, he will commit himself wholeheartedly to his family of faith. Otherwise, rather than enjoying the fulfillment of what is gained; there is a danger of focusing on what is lost. The bachelor is very often self-centered and narcissistic; a selfishness that can lead him to being cynical, and this cynicism is death to the life-giving ministry of the priest. The bachelor can find no meaning in sacrifice or suffering.

A few words from Pope Francis’ recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* should shake us up a bit:

Today we are seeing in many pastoral workers, including consecrated men and women, an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity. At

the same time, the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization. As a result, one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour. These are three evils which fuel one another (EG 78).

Something similar is also happening with priests who are obsessed with protecting their free time. [...] Some resist giving themselves over completely to mission and thus end up in a state of paralysis and acedia (EG 81).

A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum. Disillusioned with reality, with the Church and with themselves, they experience a constant temptation to cling to a faint melancholy, lacking in hope, which seizes the heart like “the most precious of the devil’s potions” Called to radiate light and communicate life, in the end they are caught up in things that generate only darkness and inner weariness, and slowly consume all zeal for the apostolate. For all this, I repeat: Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization! (EG 83).

In the DVD *Fishers of Men*, a line always stands out for me, “Where there is love, sacrifice is easy.” We priests must rediscover the love of Christ in our hearts, the love that called us to espouse His Church.

I would like to add a brief word about the nuptial meaning of the body. Pope John Paul II wrote that the love of the consecrated celibate can be “understood positively as ‘conjugal’ that is, expressed through the total gift of oneself” (cf. *Theology of the Body*). And Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that “[t]his choice has first and foremost a nuptial meaning; it is a profound identification with the heart of Christ the Bridegroom who gives his life for his Bride” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 125). At the daily Sacrifice of the Mass, the priest offers the whole of himself to his Bride as he unites his words to those of Christ: “Take this, all of you, and eat of it: *this is my Body* which will be given up for you.” The priest is not only speaking *in persona Christi*, he is also offering *himself* to the Bride daily: “this is *my* body.” The words of the Eucharistic Prayer (II) point to this reality when it states that Jesus “entered willingly into his Passion.” Or in the old translation, “a death he freely accepted!” In freely accepting, freely and willingly offering ourselves and our sexuality in chaste celibacy to our Bride we truly enter into the life-giving Paschal Mystery. Daily Mass keeps us focused on the spousal relationship with the Church as we *kiss* the altar at the beginning of Mass (*eros* into *agape*), as we pray for the needs of our family in the prayers of the faithful, as we say the words of institution, and as we greet the people of God and enter deeply into relationship with them. Pope Benedict XVI emphasized the nucleus of the priest’s daily ministry: “It is impossible to receive the Lord every day, taking his Body and Blood into our hands, pronouncing the tremendous and wonderful words: ‘This is my Body, this is my Blood’ without letting ourselves be seized by him, without letting ourselves be won over by fascination for him, without letting his infinite love change us from within” (9 June 2008).

Within this identity do I find my joy? This is our completion and fulfillment of our manhood. We are not bachelors, but rather married men espoused to the Church of Christ. We are to be configured to Christ who is the Head, Shepherd, and Spouse of the Church and to give ourselves wholeheartedly to our Bride.

*Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council stated: “This perfect continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven has always been held in particular esteem by the Church as a sign and a stimulus of charity and as a singular source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world” (LG 42). Thus these last two conferences are placed in the context of how we are to live out our chaste celibate commitment in perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom: in imitation of Christ, as an impetus for pastoral charity, and as the life-giving manner in which we have been called to live our spiritual fecundity and generativity *in* and *for* the world. Canon 277 §2 legislates: “Clerics are to behave with due prudence towards persons whose company can endanger their obligation to observe continence or give rise to scandal among the faithful.” We are to have healthy friendships and boundaries with the men and women of our lives and thus give greater witness to Christ the Light of the world. Let us allow Him to always shine forth purely from our hearts.

The priest’s spousal commitment, like that of Christian Marriage, is meant to be free, total, faithful, and fruitful. Similar to those with spouse and family, our time is not our own – no complaining! Men our age are very often working two jobs and then come home at night to begin their *real* work at home. We priests marry the Church “for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness or health, until death do us part.” Do you promise to love, honor, and obey your spouse for the whole of your life? I do! Then lay down your life out of love (*Ephesians 5*). Just like in Marriage Prep when we tell couples that love is a daily choice, we also must choose everyday to love our spouse despite her flaws and weaknesses. It is a choice – a choice to love like Christ.

*Varia:*

- Endorsement process: thank you for taking this so seriously and taking the time to offer your thoughts.
- Construction update
- Fishing Tournament Saturday
- Sunday Donor Mass and Brunch
- New espresso maker for our Cafecitos – Christmas gift
- *Evangelii Gaudium*