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“Sacred Celibacy” Part 1

Following the excellent presentation by Fr. Jose Alfaro three weeks ago for the annual chaste celibacy day of reflection, I want to continue the theme because it of such importance in our daily lives. We often do not understand or at least fully appreciate the history of celibacy in the Church and that is why Fr. Alfaro's scriptural and historical perspective was so important to hear once again. Christ and the Church are inviting us into a deeper relationship through our chaste celibate commitment. When explaining celibacy to others, we often emphasize the very practical reason, namely pastoral availability, which while certainly being true, is only the tip of the iceberg. So let's keep going deeper in our hearts to understand, discern, and embrace this particular calling in the life of the Church.

In order to gain a richer appreciation, I am going to cite extensively from an encyclical letter that will celebrate its 50th anniversary this summer written by Blessed Paul VI entitled, [*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*](#) (24 June 1967). In fact, you can thank Fr. Remek and Fr. Alfredo for encouraging me to spread out this conferences over the next two months, or you would have gotten it all tonight! More to come in December. Think about the timing of the publication of *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* during the chaos of the post conciliar era: “The transformation of society in this period of time was dramatic – one of the swiftest in recorded history. Things that are commonplace today were unimaginable before 1965. [...] Within the secular world, the combination of the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, the unrest of the civil rights movement, the dawn of radical feminism, student revolts on American and European campuses, the drug culture, the ‘hippies,’ musical and lyrical changes, and the eventual hi-tech phenomena all together created a ‘perfect-storm’ for the cultural revolution of the sixties and seventies” (*Reclaiming Our Priestly Character*, 39-40). Kind of sounds like today! Specifically surrounding the discipline of celibacy for the Latin Church, many believed that in the very near future mandatory celibacy would be jettisoned. So what does Blessed Paul VI do in the midst of such upheaval? He reserves to himself the right to clarify for the whole Church the profound meaning and “fittingness” of celibacy in the world of fifty years ago – which is still relevant today. He is very realistic as he begins: “Amid the modern stirrings of opinion, a tendency has also been manifested, and even a desire expressed, to ask the Church to re-examine this characteristic institution. It is said that in the world of our time the observance of celibacy has come to be difficult or even impossible” (#1).

The frequent use of the words “sacred celibacy” by Pope Paul touched my heart to see anew the gift of celibacy as I re-read the document in preparation for this talk. I couldn't help but to ask myself if I view my promise of celibacy as a sacred trust, or simply something that the Church has simply asked me to embrace. Certainly I accept celibacy as an important part of my vocation, but I must admit that sometimes I fail to see the “sacredness” of the gift as I fall into routine. But Blessed Paul VI focus on “sacred celibacy” is so simple and yet so profound. It is like holding

the sacred vessels we use for Mass – never would I profane a chalice and drink coke out of it at a pizza party in the Rat! So too we, vessels of clay that we are, are sacred vessels through whom Christ desires to manifest himself in the world. “Sacred celibacy” reminds us of the beauty and depth of this calling, a call which we must discern within the call to the priesthood, and which we can live only if we continuously respond to God’s grace and remain in relationship with Him.

Blessed Paul, ever the realist, acknowledges all of the common objections: Christ did not mandate it (#5), abolishing it is the solution to the crisis in numbers (#8), it is “physically and psychologically detrimental to the development of a mature and well-balanced human personality” (#10), celibacy stifles freedom, and the choice is made too young (#11). He writes that “A never-ending series of difficulties will present themselves to those who cannot ‘receive this precept’ (Mt. 19:11) and who do not know or have forgotten it is a ‘gift of God,’ (Jn. 4:10) and who moreover are unaware of the loftier reasoning, wonderful efficacy and abundant riches of this new insight into life” (#12). And thus he responds with the following earthshattering affirmation in 1967: “Hence We consider that the present law of celibacy should today continue to be firmly linked to the ecclesiastical ministry. This law should support the minister in his exclusive, definitive and total choice of the unique and supreme love of Christ; it should uphold him in the entire dedication of himself to the public worship of God and to the service of the Church; it should distinguish his state of life both among the faithful and in the world at large” (#14).

The Church believes that while clerical celibacy is indeed a discipline, it is most fitting or “particularly suited” to the priesthood as *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 16 would affirm. And why? Blessed Paul VI gives us five reasons to reflect upon: the Christological, the Ecclesiological, the Eschatological, Spiritual Intimacy, and whole-hearted pastoral charity.

Tonight we will focus on the first three motives for sacred celibacy and on December 8th, the Immaculate Conception, we will conclude this talk. So let’s begin with Christ to whom we look to as “the model and supreme ideal” (#19, cf. also 19-25). Jesus models celibacy for us in his own flesh and is thus a stimulus of love for us to love all humanity and not only one particular family. Through his teaching (Mt. 19:1-12), he clearly enunciated that some of his followers would “freely renounce marriage for the sake of the Kingdom,” and at the same time giving the freedom to say no, “let those accept it who can.” Christ the virgin is our model of manliness and our source of strength as we remain in relationship with Him. Virginité is not something that we should shrink from or see as less than virile. Christ the perfect man lived in the state of virginité and models for us how to do the same. Thus we need to study the scriptures to follow His example, encounter the Risen Lord in daily prayer, and worthily receive His Flesh in the Eucharist so as to strengthen our flesh in the path of purity. For Christ and with Christ, celibacy is a free gift of love for the people around us. “We are called to a freedom *for* greater loving, not a freedom *from* a life of intimacy. As a first theologian studying in a language program, my classmate and I were surrounded by a group of attractive young European women who could not comprehend the decisions we were making to become celibate priests. The wise old pastor with whom we shared this quandary told us to simply say: ‘*Ho fatto una scelta di amore*’ – ‘I have made a decision/a choice to love.’ The simple line of this octogenarian has brought me great peace through the years. Indeed, we freely are making a choice – a choice to love. Rather than seeing my calling as simply a privation, as I have matured, I grow more and more to see it as a gift of love to love from Love Himself” ([2013 Conference on Celibacy](#)). It is all about Jesus – following his example, freely embracing His intimate invitation, and living in relationship with Him who is love. When we lose sight of Christ and the reason behind our celibate calling we are like St. Peter on the stormy sea: the moment he took his eyes off of Jesus he began to sink (cf.

Mt. 14:29). The example I gave of my summer after first theology has always served as a reminder for me of the reason that Jesus sent his early followers out in twos. Had I been alone I can't guarantee it, but I would not have put money on me making it off of Elba unscathed. "Never presume on your own chastity" my old spiritual director would say. As priests and as seminarians, be cautious of traveling alone or putting yourselves in situations where your "wingman" can't cover you and help you get out of a difficult situation, or by his simple presence be your conscience. We need support on so many levels and celibacy is no exception to this rule.

Secondly the Ecclesiological (# 26-31). Ephesians chapter 5 reminds us of Jesus' virginal love for his Bride the Church. Pope Paul writes: "The consecrated celibacy of the sacred ministers actually manifests the virginal love of Christ for the Church, and the virginal and supernatural fecundity of this marriage, by which the children of God are born, 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh'" (#26). The mystical Body of Christ is strengthened by our commitment to chaste celibacy which is to be full, total, faithful, and fruitful as is the call to marriage. Our Bride the Church is loved in this way and experiences that love through our life and ministry as chaste and celibate spouses. The Holy Father reminds priests that in a particular way, not only through ministry, but through prayer, we express that love. As St. John Paul II wrote in his first encyclical letter, it is all about living in loving relationship: "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself; his life is meaningless if love is not revealed to him, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it" (*Redemptor Hominis*, 10). Pope Paul makes clear that there are ways in which we can ensure that we maintain our spousal relationship with the Church, and it is primarily through prayer. "So he receives joy and encouragement unceasingly from the attentive and devout recitation of the Divine Office, by which he dedicates his voice to the Church who prays together with her Spouse, and he recognizes the necessity of continuing his diligence at prayer, which is the profoundly priestly occupation" (#28). The priest, who stands *in persona Christi*, is the visible sign of spousality and spiritual fatherhood for and in the midst of the Church. The fruitfulness of the priest's spousal dimension is lived out as through spiritual fatherhood as we have discussed in other conferences. I love my bride; I love being wedded to the Church of Jesus Christ. Sure, I know the members of the Church who make up the bride are imperfect, but I see in her the good, the true, and the beautiful spotless Bride of Christ. We can have our moments, as any married couple might have, but I have wedded myself to her and she to me. My heart belongs to this woman and to no other. The celibate priest who lives in relationship with the People of God allows the ecclesiological dimension to be made manifest by his very life. Think of the old image of the *domus ecclesiae*, the church really is our home and the people we serve are not clients but family – this understanding changes everything!

Thirdly the Eschatological (#33-34). In the present age, we live in the "already and not yet" and the priest is a sign that the kingdom to come is already being lived in the here and now. We are to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world (cf. Jn. 17:16); thus by our manner of life we point to the reality of the Kingdom to come. The celibate priest is an image of "other worldliness" when, as we heard in last Sunday's gospel: "At the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven" (Mt. 22:30). The priest's celibate life serves as a signpost pointing to the Kingdom and thus he is an eschatological sign of the kingdom, an icon of eternal realities. The ministry of presence of a priest at a deathbed, in moments of crisis, tragedy, or sickness – he is a sign of eternal hope. Think for a moment about when Hollywood needs to visually portray the archetypal battle of good versus evil on the screen, the classic portrayal of an eschatological encounter, it is almost always expressed with a portrayal of a Catholic priest – he is the image of Christ visibly present in the world assisting people towards

the Kingdom. Thus when people see the Roman collar in the midst of daily life, even without having to say a word, the priest is pointing to the Eschaton! I could not even begin to recount the innumerable moments of extraordinary encounters with people at the grocery store, in restaurants, in airports, on vacation, etc. in which God used me as a sign post for the Kingdom – what an extraordinary gift we possess in a particular way as celibate priests.

As we conclude tonight with still two more dimensions to go, namely spiritual intimacy and pastoral fruitfulness, let's listen again to Papa Montini's reflection from early in the encyclical: "A never-ending series of difficulties will present themselves to those who cannot 'receive this precept' (Mt. 19:11) and who do not know or have forgotten it is a 'gift of God,' (Jn. 4:10) and who moreover are unaware of the loftier reasoning, wonderful efficacy and abundant riches of this new insight into life" (#12). My prayer as your rector is that you not have to travel the path of "a never-ending series of difficulties" and so now is the time to honestly and sincerely ask the questions and beg for the grace of receiving celibacy as a gift and mystery to be lived *in* and *with* Christ crucified and risen from the dead. This means at times it will be lived with great ease in the resurrection and yet at other times you will be in the crucible with Him suffering to remain faithful and true to the calling received. Pray for and foster this gift by living a life worthy of your calling! As Jesus himself has said: "Whoever can accept this ought to accept it" (Mt. 19:12).