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## Sexuality and Celibate Chastity: Friends Not Foes

Priest and author Ronald Rolheiser tells of a curious young man finding himself seated next to a woman religious on a plane trip. He asks her a number of questions, mostly about celibate chastity. He remarks, “What intrigues me about you, Sister, is your obvious zest for life. Now imagine how much more satisfying that life would be if you also had sex.” And her response? “What impresses me about you,” she says, “is your sincerity and the fact that you are searching for love. But love and sex are not the same thing. Now imagine how much richer your life might be if you were open to that possibility.” How easily people can amiably use mutually intelligible words and not understand each other at all!

The word *sexuality* encompasses much more than genital sex. It includes our way of being in the world as a man or woman, the attitudes and characteristics that we call masculine and



feminine. The word and the reality remind us that we are social beings, that we need and desire friendship and affection. These are God-given ways to be holy. Sexual and spiritual energy should be friends and not foes. Both aim at union with God and others. Human sexuality has more to do with self-transcendence than with self-fulfillment.

The human life cycle neatly outlines the discussion of sexuality and celibate chastity. Forming an identity and developing closer relationships are different for you and me at twenty than at forty-five. Twenty years later these opportunities and challenges are different again. Over a lifetime we change in our self-understanding, our knowledge of how the world works, our understanding of our faith in Jesus Christ and our way of living that faith. Why would we not also change in our understanding and appreciation of our sexuality and our celibate chastity?

Talking about intimacy, sexuality, and the vow of chastity is difficult. People lack effective words or a sense of comfort, and mutual understanding fails to occur. When asked why we chose a life of celibate chastity, we might answer, “For the sake of the kingdom; in order to love everyone and not just one person; to be more available.” These answers are “not bad,” but they leave most of us and our listeners unsatisfied.

When I use the phrase celibate chastity here, I will mean vowed chastity as it is lived within religious institutes today. Celibate chastity is at the very heart of the way of life we call religious. It is not just an ascetical practice, though it may feel that way at times. And, while it is intimately related to our mission, it did not come into existence to make religious congregations’ apostolic work more efficient. Celibate chastity is a defining characteristic of our way of life and needs to be seen as such. God has reached out to us in Jesus. Jesus has called us to

follow him. The relationship we have with him must be central to our lives.

Have you ever asked yourself: “Where am I going in life?” “How am I using or wasting my talents?” “Does my presence in this religious community make any difference at all—would I be missed if I were not here?” Such questions are related to both identity and intimacy, particularly challenging issues for young religious. They need to form a first or provisional identity as they move from their late teens to their late twenties. They need also to face questions of intimacy in their lives.

Identity formation gets underway when we ask, “Who am I and what do I cherish or hold dear?” In answer-

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ing we move through three phases. First we explore our life options; next we see that we must choose one from among a variety of attractive possibilities; finally we must decide, com-

mitting ourselves to a particular identity. Understandably, this process is influenced by culture and custom. The manner in which men and women approach it varies. Nevertheless, exploring options and making difficult choices are part of the life history of almost all who have achieved an identity instead of having one thrust upon them. Some among us foreclose identity. Overwhelmed by the number of options or lacking the wherewithal to succeed in one or another, we quickly step into an identity that is ready-made, like a shirt that comes ready-made through the mail. We keep it whether it fits well or not.

Foreclosing our identity sets the stage for later problems with intimacy. There is hope, though, for, if we have



not formed an identity early, we are given other opportunities over the years. Times of transition give us new chances. At midlife, for example, certain reassessments about life can be made.

### **Identity and Intimacy**

Why spend all this time discussing identity? Because of its relation to intimacy. This word has been defined too narrowly in the past. I suggest this description: Intimacy occurs when we are sure enough about ourselves as persons, are so much at home with ourselves, that we can risk closeness with someone else.<sup>1</sup>

During our early adulthood we are young in our understanding and experience of intimacy. Some would suggest that, while deep loving relationships are possible for young people, they are more the exception than the rule. For most of us mature intimacy is just not possible until later in life. Uncertainty and confusion often surround young adult sexuality, and the rich spirituality that lies at the heart of mature celibate chastity is often not available until the middle years.

When men and women religious move through their early adult years, intimacy questions arise, and genital-sexuality questions as well. Today the media and a good many people see genital restraint as constricted and partial living that leads to a lonely life ahead. How, then, do we prepare those in formation for the challenges they will face? How do we help them grow into a celibate and chaste way of loving others? How do we help them understand, from our own experience, the joys and satisfactions of celibate chaste living?

In their late twenties and early thirties some sisters, priests, and brothers fall in love for the first time. This experience, sometimes more infatuation than genuine intimacy, can be an important step toward building lov-

ing adult relationships with other men and women. This outcome can occur, however, only if they can talk about the relationship. Unfortunately these relationships often remain hidden, shrouded in secrecy. We all need some privacy in our relationships, but, if secrecy overshadows any of them, trouble usually lies ahead.

You and I benefit from time together with friends and so does our community. It is natural to look forward to being with people whose very presence is life-giving for us. Religious life itself has always included caring relationships that grow over time. Witness the great friendships down through the centuries, friendships that flourished even when rules warned against them. The tendency of most of us is to share our friends with others.

Secrecy in a relationship is something quite different and becomes an obstacle to mature celibate chastity. Secrecy robs people of the opportunity of getting advice from someone outside of the relationship, someone who can keep them honest about what is transpiring. All of us risk deluding ourselves about relationships, particularly those with romantic overtones. The decisions we make about them may be flawed. And in these matters people do make decisions. If two religious end up in bed together, they should not claim that angels carried them there. Rather, they need to admit that they made a series of decisions that led to this outcome. We need privacy for some relationships to grow, but we must also set limits if we are to live with integrity. This is true not only in the lives of priests and religious, but in everyone's life, married or single.

388

Living my life in keeping with the commitments that I made means that my love will not be expressed genitally, but in reality it may be no less intimate. In our sexuality as in so many other areas of our lives, we do well to remember that we are unfinished and incom-



plete. In making prudent life choices about sexuality, we in turn make many other decisions. With midlife we become more aware that limits have been part of all our best choices.

### **Friendship**

Any intimate relationship stretches one's identity. But is that not what needs to happen as we move through the stages of our life? We need to make ourselves known, risk our self-definition, and allow others to come close to us precisely so that we can be known, influenced, and possibly changed as a result of the relationship. Many situations call for the risk of our self-understanding. Close friendships allow us to relax the stance which we usually assume when facing the world and most other people. Friends reach a part of us that is inaccessible to others; they know us as others do not. Friends are not frightened by one another's weaknesses, and so they feel free to share their fears, concerns, difficulties. As a consequence they learn to be more at home with themselves, their qualities, their preoccupations.

In community life people can risk self-definition, and most do. Some, however, stay on the fringes, moving in and out of the community's life but refusing to let other members have any claim on them. If a weekend activity is planned, fringe members will encourage the others to make their plans, saying they will fit in if they can. Whereas for most of us absence from community activities occurs from time to time, for fringe members it is a way of life. They have difficulty with intimacy; by not

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allowing the group to come close to them, they avoid the “difficulty” of being changed by their presence. They protect their self-definition, and they perpetuate their isolation, living alone in the midst of the group. Their relationships fail to flourish. What they may point to as intimacy is often a pseudo-intimacy. The consequences of refusing to risk self-definition are grave. The persons deny themselves one of life’s greatest gifts, the experience of friendship.

Situations involving cooperation and competition can help us to stretch our self-understanding. Working together with others on a task, we become aware of personal gifts and abilities not recognized previously. We may discover that we have skills that help a group complete an assigned task. Athletes have similar experiences. In difficult games they may discover unknown talents and learn endurance as they make an all-out effort to win.

The experience of intimacy can be a help to prayer. A corollary is that people may apply their fear of human intimacy to God as well, keeping God at arm’s length so that even God does not disturb supposedly well-thought-out plans. Such plans are far from the indifference sought in making a good discernment. Only when I am indifferent am I free enough to appreciate what is in God’s heart for me. If I pray regularly and enjoy intimacy with God, God’s desire has a good chance of becoming my own, for my own benefit. Authentic discernment demands that I risk intimacy with God, talking over my mixed feelings, my fears, in a closeness that could change my self-definition and my life.

390

Do not, however, confuse self-disclosure with intimacy itself. True intimacy includes caution and selectivity. It is altogether different from telling one’s life story in great detail to a total stranger at a social gathering—something most of us back off from in embarrassment,



excusing ourselves for a moment, with the hope that upon our return the person will be just as animatedly engaged with someone else. Real relationships take time. Some parts of ourselves, shared easily at the right time in a relationship, could not have been spoken about earlier.

Though friends are people with whom you and I share confidences, they are much more than that. Over time a history develops between two friends. They prove themselves mutually dependable. Eventually they realize that they valued each other long before they ever thought of anything like an evaluation.

### **Friendship between Men and Women**

Using but a few words, the psychologist Carol Gilligan has put into perspective the differences between men and women. "It all goes back, of course, to Adam and Eve," she says, "a story that shows, among other things, that if you make a woman out of a man, you are bound to get into trouble."

When it comes to relationships, men and women have differences in style and expectation. In a number of cultures men learn early in life how to be part of a team. As they grow up, teamwork continues to be important for them both in work and play. The bonds that men develop, then, depend more on solidarity than self-disclosure. It is the things they do together that bind them. When they do not have those things to do, many men stop coming together. Among women, relationships are usually more important than anything they might do together. Women tend to value their friendships with other women especially for the emotional support and understanding they receive; they spend time together exploring their personal experience and inner world of meaning.

Men tend to be uncomfortable when they sense that a woman friend wants them to reveal more about them-

selves than they care to. Women tend to be disappointed that their male friends are not so forthcoming in emotional sharing as they would like them to be. Men and women, though, agree strongly on this: in cross-gender relationships, the issue of sex has to be resolved before the friendship can deepen. If a man and woman in a relationship have a strong sexual attraction to one another and fail to talk about these feelings with someone else, trouble often lies ahead.

Men and women, of course, differ also in other ways than we have mentioned, but friendships continue to flourish between them. With friends we do not have to be altogether consistent; we can think and feel differently on alternate days with little consequence. During periods of significant personal change, friends can and should be specially aware and considerate, not exaggerating personal ideas of how things are “supposed to be.”

All people have both a masculine and a feminine side within their personalities. Every culture has its gender images, but rigid adherence to them can be quite problematic, leading to distorted emotional development and difficulties with intimacy. Early in life most women are unaware of their masculine side, and the same can be said of most men and their feminine side. For a relationship of mature intimacy, the masculine and feminine aspects in us must have a certain level of integration. This is true regardless of sexual orientation.

During their twenties and thirties, men and women struggle with intimacy in different ways. A man often sees a danger in closeness, fearing it will limit his independence. He shies away. A woman is often apprehensive about separation. At this time in their lives, while men are having difficulty with closeness in a relationship, women are finding it hard to be separate and be their individual selves. A failure to integrate masculine and feminine sides



gives rise to several consequences. A woman finding her masculine side threatening shies away from demonstrating her natural competence in one area of life or another. A man fearing implications of his more intuitive feminine qualities gives the message that he is unavailable for relationship. He can appear sulky, withdrawn, overly sensitive. Midlife is a good time for doing this work of integration. Increasingly aware that we have lived at least half of our earthly life already, we become less concerned about gender image and we grow in our ability for genuine closeness and in our self-knowledge and acceptance.

Some aspects of ourselves defy greater self-knowledge. These shadow traits, often obvious to others, are hidden from us. When a man projects the positive qualities of his own feminine side onto a woman, she becomes highly desirable to him—the object of his fantasies and sexual longings. This situation becomes, in time, suffocating for a woman. As she develops her own personality in the relationship, she finds this same man now blaming her somehow for his unhappiness and negative moods. When a woman projects her unconscious masculine side onto a man, she overvalues him, seeing him as a hero and guide. Over time, however, she begins to see her earlier savior and guide as the source of all her feelings of belittlement and disappointment.

Projection does little or nothing to foster mature intimacy. It fosters mutual fascination and infatuation, which can be important steps toward mature intimacy,

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but relationships built on this foundation do not last. In such a relationship the persons are actually in love with themselves.

### **Sexual Orientation**

In any discussion about human sexuality and celibate chastity, we need to say a word about sexual orientation. There have always been, are now, and always will be homosexually oriented men and women as members of religious congregations. Among this group are persons of exemplary celibate chastity; others have stretched the meaning of the vow of chastity beyond recognition. But the same can be said of their heterosexual brothers and sisters. I believe that some recent discussions about the area of sexual orientation have taken the wrong focus. Rather than emphasizing people's heterosexuality or homosexuality, we would better direct our energies towards helping everyone called to religious life to live lives of celibate chastity.

The area of sexual orientation is complex. There are many different approaches in discussing the matter. Some use the term "transitory homosexuality" to describe a situation in which a person finds himself or herself sexually attracted to a member of the same sex but is not, in fact, homosexually oriented. If this is the case with a novice, what the formation personnel need is understanding and compassion. Others would contend that more than a few people, while defining themselves in the main as heterosexual or homosexual, find that their sexual feelings and fantasies are more accurately described as falling along a continuum. Formation personnel and other religious need to be at home with their own sexuality and orientation and, of course, with their choice to live in a celibate chaste way.

Of particular concern in recent years has been the abuse of male children at the hands of the clergy and



male religious. There is no empirical evidence linking homosexuality with this behavior called pederasty. As tragic as sexual abuse is for all involved, wrong would not be righted nor children protected by policies based on the faulty notion that homosexuality and a predisposition to abuse children are linked.

Mention is sometimes made about the destructive effect that a gay subculture can have when it is present in a house of formation, a seminary, or a religious community. Subcultures, be they sexual or otherwise, have no place in religious life. When they do emerge, however, it might be more profitable to seek the reason for their existence rather than simply insist that they cease to exist.

In consecrated life our primary identity must be our identity as religious persons. No other identities—family, intellectual, interpersonal, sexual—none of these nor any other can take precedence over our identity as religious persons. That identity more than anything else shapes our faith, our self-understanding, and our journey of self-transcendence.

### **Spiritual Growth**

If sexuality lies at the center of the spiritual life, the spiritual life is likewise at the heart of genuine celibate chaste living. For our celibate chastity, Jesus Christ must rest at the center of our lives. For that to happen, we must accept Jesus' love for us in a special way. The relationship that each of us has with him and its pattern of development are unique. Everyone's spirituality must be tailor-made to reflect these realities. As religious all of us have been presented with formulas and plans of action that carry with them some guarantee of success in the spiritual life, but unfortunately those formulas and plans of action tend to ignore the unique relationship that we each have with Jesus. They may even get in the way.

To ensure that our life with God is at the heart of our celibate chastity, we need be ready for spiritual awakenings, willing to explore the longings that are present in them. Spiritual awakenings may be like sexual awakening at the age of puberty. They may be startling or more gradual. Our desire for God grows. Finally we become vividly aware that God's love is given to us freely with no strings attached, without our having earned it. The idea of having to earn God's love is just out of the question.

To be involved with Jesus Christ means embracing the paschal mystery. He asks us to imitate him, not admire him. When you and I dedicate our celibate lives to him, to closeness to him, we must realize that it includes suffering and death.

Relationships do not just happen; they take time and effort. Throughout the ages spiritual writers have insisted that personal prayer is essential to a relationship with the Lord. For that bond to become strong, moments of prayer must eventually become regular and longer, ideally an hour each day. More than a few in religious life, however, will plead a lack of time. That claim rings true, because the activity of some of us today borders on the pathological. It is the single greatest threat to our interior life and leads only to greater self-preoccupation, an overemphasis on efficiency, and restlessness. Those who are overly busy are less likely to encounter Jesus in the marketplace of everyday life; they lack sufficient interiority. An obsession with efficiency leaves little room for spontaneity, for an openness to wonder. Restlessness, compulsively seeking one experience after another, interferes with developing a spirit of solitude, hospitality, and genuine prayer.

By way of contrast, the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit are evident in the lives of those who pray regularly. Numbered among those fruits are charity, a spirit of joy,



patience, forbearance, faith, and reverence for oneself and others. The gifts include wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, piety, fortitude, and fear of the Lord. Are these fruits and gifts of the Spirit present in our lives? If not, we need to wonder about how seriously we take our relationship with Jesus Christ. We need to decide what we need to change in our lives in order to practice what we espouse publicly. Our Christian life, at its heart, is about a relationship with Jesus Christ. That relationship is the solution for my restiveness, the answer to my questions, the source of my joy.

There will always be people in our world who consider those who live our kind of life to be naïve and foolish. And we are. Naïve, because the choice does not follow social convention; foolish, because to embrace and live well a life of celibate chastity leads inevitably to a revolution of the heart. Bernard Lonergan SJ calls it “an otherworldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations.” Living such a life bears great fruit. We discover the true meaning of passion, becoming more deeply spiritual and sexual at the same time. Over time we become more at home with ourselves and with God. For the person who embraces fully the challenge of a life of celibate chastity, the description “deeply spiritual and profoundly human” becomes eventually the only one that is apt. It tells the whole story. Let us pray that we have the courage to make it our own.

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### Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. After reading Sammon's article, are we able to give a more adequate answer to the question, "Why do we choose a life of celibate chastity?"
2. Have we found that our experiences of intimacy with others has been a help in the fervor of our prayer life?
3. Let's explore the implications of this sentence: If sexuality lies at the center of the spiritual life, the spiritual life is likewise at the heart of genuine celibate chaste living.