

Can Celibacy

Be  
Defended?

## Bishop Allen H. Vigneron

The celibate life of Catholic priests is constantly held up to ridicule for being unnatural and unnecessary. To get some answers on the nature of priestly celibacy and how it can be defended, Crisis traveled to Detroit and talked to Auxiliary Bishop Allen H. Vigneron. Bishop Vigneron, rector of Sacred Heart Major Seminary, guides the formation of priestly candidates for the third Christian millennium.

Crisis: Bishop Vigneron, could you share with us your understanding of priestly celibacy as a full flowering of the human person?

Bishop Vigneron: I began to understand priestly celibacy more fully because of two influences. The first was my own reading of the fathers of the Church, the Doctors, and the mystics about the interpretation of the Cantic of Canticles (the Song of Solomon) in the Old Testament. This tradition of interpretation sees Christian life as a marriage between Christ and the Church. In the Christian life, the marriage between Christ and the Church is lived out in the life of each individual as a marriage between Christ and the soul. The New Covenant is Jesus espoused with the Church, and each of us enters into that marriage by the sacraments of initiation.

The second influence was the Holy Father's teaching about the human person and about marriage. The Holy Father time and time again says that the meaning of human life lies in the gift of self to another. That is the fundamental nature of human beings—that we are created to make a gift of ourselves. The prototype for this type of giving is marriage—we are sexual beings, made to give ourselves to another, and that self-gift is life-producing. Now the Church teaches that this dynamic can be accomplished even apart from the marriage relationship. So that there are people who find the fulfillment of their human being, which is necessarily sexual, wherever they give themselves to another sacrificially and wherever that self-gift is life-giving. The Holy Father has helped us understand that human sexuality is redefined at a personal level, a level that transcends the merely physical or the merely animal. So, then, celibacy can be a form of sexual fulfillment, because in celibacy we can give ourselves generously, fully, sacrificially to another in a way that is certainly life-generating.

So, I think that for me that it has been the confluence of these two sources: the Holy Father's teaching on the human person and on marriage and sexuality and a recovery of the rich tradition on the meaning of the Song of Songs and Christ's work as the establishment of a marriage between God and humanity in the Church, through the heart and soul of each member of the Church.

This teaching deepens profoundly one's understanding of celibacy.

I think it is remarkable. I have been reading George Weigel's biography of the Holy Father, and I just finished the section recounting the pope's course on "Love and Responsibility," which he gave to his doctoral students at Lublin. I agree with Mr. Weigel's comment that the pope's teaching on the human person, marriage, and human sexuality is the most effective response that the Church can make to our age's fixation with sex. We are not going to get very far by repeating prohibitions against certain actions. We have to help people understand the reason for these boundaries and to understand that the crossing of these boundaries is a violation of their own human identity and is bound to make them miserable. I believe that the celibacy of priests and men and women in consecrated life serves as a further witness to the world that there is more to our sexual identity and more to sexual fulfillment than a variety or intensity of physical sexual experiences. Our sexuality is the sexuality of a person, and therefore, it has to have a personal meaning, and only when it does will our sexuality achieve its fulfillment.

The notion of nuptial imagery is appealing. Tell us more about the total "gift of self" that a priest makes to Jesus.

Every Christian is in some sense married to Christ, but each lives out this self-gift in his own particular state in life. So a married man really is giving himself to Christ through the gift of himself to his wife. A priest makes this gift in a number of different dimensions. He gives himself totally to the Church, and in that, he is a kind of sacrament of Christ as the bridegroom. But likewise, he is also giving himself totally to Christ. He receives all from Christ and gives back all to Christ. Jesus and the Church are the others to which the priest gives himself. The pope, in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, speaks of this particular kind of love as pastoral love. In his celibacy, the priest is living out Christ's own love for the Church, and at the same time, the priest is giving himself totally to Christ. He is totally dedicated, totally consecrated to Christ as His instrument for Christ's own self-gift. In giving himself totally to the pastoral care of the people, he is ultimately giving himself totally to Christ.

Was our Lord the first to show us the way to live a celibate life?

Yes, the Divine Word fulfills the Old Testament revelation in a surpassing way: He becomes incarnate—the Son of God in the flesh. The dawn of this bright sun is Our Lady; the typical expectation for her was that she would have been a faithful daughter of Israel by her marriage. But in fact, that expectation was transcended and brought into a whole new dimension, when, at the incarnation, she was invited to accept the gift of consecration to be the virgin-mother of God. And so the coming of Christ brings this new reality, to be lived by the virginal Christ and adumbrated by the virgin-mother, Mary. We can say that Mary and Jesus became consecrated to virginity at the same moment. When He became a human being, obviously then He can be properly described as virginal, and Our Lady, in that same moment of the incarnation, likewise accepts her consecration as a virgin. Our Lady, as a human person, is an exemplification of how Christ's disciples in the kingdom can reflect His total self-gift in virginity—virginity that is not sterile. That fertile virginity is the real key here: God made man to be fruitful. When God saves the world, He is not going to unmake that dimension of what He originally created in man. So the key to Christian virginity, Christian celibacy, is that it must pass this test of fertility. Does it produce life in the consecrated one and in other people?

So you are saying that in the gift of celibacy, the priest has the power to beget spiritual children?

Right. It needs to be thus, otherwise a priest's celibacy will only seem to be a crippling burden, because God made every boy to grow up to be a father, and every man needs to find a way to be that. As a priest lives out the mystery of fruitful virginity in his own life, he is a witness to all the Christian fathers in their physical paternity. For them, too, it is not enough to engender a child physically, but they need to be spiritual fathers for the children entrusted to them. When people beget children physically but fail to live out the spiritual dimension of their parenting, I think we judge them to have failed in their vocation. Every parent needs to be a spiritual father or mother.

It is amazing that on the continuum of thought on celibacy, some people see celibacy as a fulfillment of human sexuality and others as an aberration of sexuality. Could you comment on this?

When people see celibacy as a kind of pathology, the proper questions to be asked are: "What do you understand to be the meaning of sexuality?" and "Can sexuality find its fulfillment only in genital activity?" If you hold such an opinion, then you would have to recognize the corollary that a husband cannot be faithful to his wife while they are not able to share sexual intimacy. We know for example, that if his wife were gravely ill, a husband could express his

love, his gift of self, in many ways, through his attentiveness, care, and concern.

There are people who from a pragmatic point of view would say that we could have more priests if we did not observe strictly this discipline of celibacy. Now, it's good to have more priests only insofar as this advances the Church's mission. I don't believe that the Church's mission would be helped in the long run if in the short term we were able to recruit more priests by making celibacy optional. I think one of the principal challenges, if not the principal challenge, identified by the Second Vatican Council is for the Church to defend the dignity of the human person and to stand up for the gospel truth about the meaning of human life. That battle, that war, is being fought out on the battlefield about human sexuality. And so today, more than ever, the Church needs to persevere in her witness to the nature of human sexuality, which is nothing less than her witness about the nature of the human person. And I believe that the celibacy of our priests and the virginity of our religious women and men is an indispensable component of that witness, a bulwark in defending this truth about the human person. If we step back from this witness, what we would be doing is capitulating in this important struggle. Now more than ever, we need to give a witness about the Christian meaning of the human person, the Christian meaning of human sexuality. And priestly celibacy is an eloquent voice in this testimony.

If we cannot find enough people, generous young men and women, to answer the call of Christ to virginal living, to celibate living, then that is an indictment of the health of the faith life in our Christian communities. In the kingdom of God, there should be enough people who answer this call, because God calls all that are needed. If there are not enough people hearing the call, then we have to ask ourselves, "What is wrong? Why don't we get the obstacles out of the way so that people can hear and support the call?"

How is celibacy related to the ontological character imprinted at ordination?

When we say that holy orders imprints an indelible character, we're stating in a summary fashion that this sacrament irrevocably changes a man's identity. Thereafter, he is configured to Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church. Every dimension of his being is totally consecrated to the pastoral ministry Christ shares with him through ordination. This total dedication is lived out through the priest's acts of teaching, sanctifying, and governing the portion of God's people entrusted to his care. That he serves as a celibate priest is a further expression and intensification of this total self-gift. A celibate priest's gift of himself to Christ as an instrument of His pastoral ministry is lived out here even in the depths of the priest's own psychosexual identity.

Accepting the character imprinted at ordination is an act of pastoral love and a consecration to live out that charity every minute of every day after ordination. Priestly celibacy is an aspect, a most significant dimension of living out that love. A priest's celibacy is a sharing in the Lord's own virginal-nuptial love, which finds its source in the self-sacrificing love of the Shepherd for His flock, of the Head for His body, of the Bridegroom for His bride.

Comment on how one sustains and deepens one's commitment to celibacy throughout a lifetime.

Perhaps the easiest way to respond is to pick up once more on what I said earlier about priestly celibacy being a gospel way (more specifically an eschatological way) to achieve the intimacy and generativity that are the true meaning of human sexuality. Celibacy is, then, about a consecrated, inviolable relationship. And like any significant relationship, it needs, first of all, to be nurtured.

For a priest, this means prayer first and foremost. Prayer is the way that a priest's gift of self to Christ is kept alive and nurtured to grow ever stronger. A husband needs to come home at night and call when he has to be away. A priest needs to pray; he needs to maintain regular and significant contact with Christ. Further, just as a husband's love for his wife is deepened by living out that love in all he does at work or around home, so the priest's own gift of self in pastoral charity is reinforced through the acts of love that are his ministry.

And here, we need to acknowledge that no man is just born with excellent skills of communication or with an infallible instinct for acting with love. These qualities have to be worked at. Even unbelievers recognize that fact. And by faith we know more: namely, that progress here is possible only under the impulse of grace. To keep a relationship healthy, one has to work to get rid of the habits and quirks that impede ever fuller communication and unfettered self-giving. Husbands have to work at this with regard to their wives. Priests have to work at this in the way they relate to Christ. The traditional name for this "work" is asceticism. In addition to prayer, priests must fast, do other acts of penance and mortification, examine their consciences daily, root out their prominent faults, go to confession regularly, meet with their spiritual directors, get the support of friends, and live simply. In short, we priests must live lives of ongoing conversion from the old Adam of self-centeredness to the New Man that is Christ.

And in each vocation—whether marriage or celibacy—a man needs to exercise care to avoid situations that would provoke him to be unfaithful to the relationship that is the center of who he is and what he does. Sometimes for this

care we use the expression “observing boundaries.” Put simply, that means that a priest must treat every person the way a married man would treat everyone but his wife. And a priest, like a good husband, has to be able to be honest about what’s going on. If a man has a part of his life that he’s unwilling to share with his wife, that’s a “red flag” about trouble in their relationship. If a priest has a part of his life that he can’t or won’t talk about with his spiritual director or close priest-friend, that, too, should be a wake-up call that something is wrong.

The analogy is, I believe, on target. The same sorts of strategies that make it possible for a married couple to come to their 50th anniversary saying that they are more in love than ever will bring a priest to his golden jubilee witnessing to the joy and fulfillment he’s found in the ministry.

As rector of Sacred Heart Major Seminary, you are able to help other men to advance in their own discernment toward celibacy.

We try with all the resources at our disposal to serve them that way. We say to them that a touchstone in their discernment is to ask whether their celibate living will be fruitful for them. They need to think whether taking up this life will be something they can do with peace or whether it will cause them resentment. And to the degree that any priest resents the Church for requiring this gift of him, he will have difficulties and the whole community will have difficulties. The renewal of celibate priestly life called for by the Second Vatican Council can only be achieved by a more integral and richer understanding of celibate consecration.

The renewal of priestly celibacy has been well-articulated by Vatican II, but certainly, the Church has had a long history of priestly celibacy, hasn’t it?

Yes, this is not some new idea, but what we must do in every generation is reclaim this rich understanding of our own Christian life and our Christian vocation. I think you could make a similar point about parenting. For a very long time, we were simply able to take for granted what it means to be a husband, a wife, a parent. But given the challenges posed by certain views abroad in the world today, one has to be much more actively engaged in thinking through for oneself what we might in the past have taken for granted. It is true about marriage, and it is true about the priesthood and celibacy.

And in your own life, Bishop Vigneron, your years of priestly celibacy must be a source of grace and joy for you.

I have a much richer and clearer understanding of the meaning of my celibate living today than I did when I made the commitment. I suspect most married

people would say the same when they approach the 25th anniversary of their consecration. I have found my celibate ministry fruitful in a way that I did not anticipate. This satisfaction of being a spiritual father is far beyond what I ever anticipated. So I do think that the view I am articulating today is not, for me, simply a matter of theoretical speculation; yes, it represents insight I have gained both by reading and thinking but also by reflecting on my own life and my consecration to celibate living.

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