

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – January 28, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,225 words

St. Paul sets forth some of the most beautiful teachings on marriage to be found in the New Testament, even comparing holy matrimony to the sacrificial love of Christ for his Church.¹ But then there are those passages in his writings like that of our second reading this Sunday, in which he seems to discourage marriage; or, perhaps, we could say that he downplays it. You see, Paul was a celibate, and that was a life-choice that he embraced and greatly valued. It was not a mere circumstance that he found himself in, but something that he freely chose for himself.² He had a profound theological understanding of celibacy and saw it as a great blessing, which he wanted others to consider and share in as well.

Priestly celibacy has been the discipline of the Latin or Roman Church³ for two millennia,⁴ following the example of our Lord himself, who himself chose to live among us as a celibate. It is a very misunderstood discipline and sometimes controversial. In recent years, as we have suffered the shame of terrible scandals in the Church, some have called for the abolition or relaxation of celibacy laws. That, however, does not pass the common-sense test: when we consider who was abused, it's unclear how marriage would solve that grave problem. Then there are those who have seen a change on celibacy as a solution to the clergy shortage. But there is a facile logic there also, for it has been demonstrated that churches with married clergy are also experiencing a decline in clergy numbers.⁵ In either case, we see that many people view priestly celibacy in a negative light.

This negativity surrounding celibacy is even to be found among those who love the Church's teachings and disciplines. You will hear many faithful Catholic laity and priests explain celibacy in a way that might lead some to think that it has no real positive value. For example, it is said that priests are so busy, so they do not have time for a wife and kids; if they had a family, they might either neglect them or end up neglecting parishioners. Moreover, the Church could not afford to pay them a living wage sufficient to raise a family! Celibate priests costs less and can more easily respond to a hospital emergency in the middle of the night, or even go on a trip with a youth group, as I did last weekend with the March for Life. All of this may be true, but is also tends to reduce the value of celibacy to a sort of pragmatism. Surely, if our Lord chose celibacy for himself, then it must have a deeper significance than things like budgets and the coordination of schedules!

Well, as usual, there is so much that could be said on this topic, but we need to hone in: the key to understanding celibacy correctly and in a positive way is in seeing it as an eschatological sign – that is, a sign that points us beyond the life of this world to the life of the world to come. Christ himself taught that in heaven people neither marry nor are given in

¹ Cf. Ephesians 5:21-33.

² Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:7-8.

³ Married priests who are former Anglicans, Episcopalians, or Lutherans are relatively few and are exceptions to the rule in the West. The topic of clerical celibacy in the East is complex and not the subject of our current reflection.

⁴ Many still hold to the outdated view that because most of the Apostles had been married, and celibacy laws in the Church were only introduced later, then celibacy was uncommon in the early centuries. However, several modern scholars have demonstrated convincingly that celibacy was the norm from the beginning: the Apostles renounced relations with their wives (upon mutual agreement), precisely when they “left everything” to follow Christ. See, for example, the study of Alfons Cardinal Stickler: *The Case for Clerical Celibacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

⁵ This New York Times article from 2001 is emblematic of a phenomenon which is widely discussed down to the present day: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/09/us/demand-is-rising-for-members-of-the-clergy-as-fewer-answer-the-calling.html>.

marriage.⁶ Marriage is a reality that pertains only to this life on earth, created by God for the furtherance of the human race and the upbuilding of a sane and healthy society. It ends with death. That is why, after the death of a spouse, the surviving party may re-marry, the original bond having ceased to exist. Surely in heaven there will be a great affinity between those who were married on earth; but there, life will be changed, and our joy will be found fully in God. In other words, in heaven, we will all be celibate. That is why Christ also added that we will be “like the angels”⁷ there – we will not be angels, but we will in some way be like them.

A man who responds to a call to celibacy freely renounces his right to marry. Marriage is the natural state in which God set the human race: Adam and Eve were created in marriage. Ask any young girl if she wants to be a mommy when she grows up, and she will say yes. Ask any young boy if he wants to be a dad and have a family when he grows up; if you catch him before he starts thinking that girls have cooties, he will say yes also. This is natural and normal; we ordinarily do not even have to reflect upon it, for it is the way we are hard-wired. A man who embraces celibacy has not been hard-wired differently; rather, he freely renounces his natural right to marriage, to respond to a supernatural calling. In so doing, he becomes a sign and a reminder to others: there is a life beyond this world; it is a life that will be different in many respects; it is also a life that will be fulfilling and beautiful, happy and joyful – a life that, indeed, we can even experience in some degree, here and now.

In our present cultural environment – saturated more than ever with sex and with grave distortions of sexuality – the witness of celibacy is sorely needed. In a world that wants us to think that we cannot live without sex, the priest shows all people of good will that we can indeed do so – that we need not be a slave to our passions. And that, not as a test of self-endurance, but as a profoundly positive commitment, supported by the grace of God. The priest, then, who lives out his celibate commitment well, is a life-giving force in our world. Yes, he does – to use the language of St. Paul⁸ – have fewer distractions, fewer limitations on his freedom for ministry, so that he can be more available to those whom he has been sent to serve. But his service and his life thereby also become a living witness of the model our Lord himself gave and has revealed to be the life that awaits us all in heaven, where we will be totally fulfilled and experience a happiness that cannot be described in worldly terms.⁹

May we all have this positive understanding of priestly celibacy and hold it in esteem, so that we might more effectively support and encourage those whom God is calling to this way of life. On several occasions I have talked with young men about a possible vocation to the priesthood and they responded: “I think maybe I could be a deacon – they can be married!” Well, we do need good deacons, but we also need good priests who give their hearts totally to Christ and are confident that, only with his help,¹⁰ they will be able to live even now how all of us will live in heaven, and so bear witness before others to the life of the world to come. St. Paul was profoundly convinced: he freely embraced the celibate life and earnestly desired that others embrace it as well. Countless priests down through the centuries have done likewise. May St. Paul intercede for our parish and our diocese, of whom he is the principal patron, and obtain for us a positive understanding of this teaching – and many holy vocations in our time of great need!

⁶ Cf. Matthew 22:30.

⁷ Cf. Mark 12:25.

⁸ In our second reading – 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

⁹ Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:9.

¹⁰ Cf. John 15:5.