



My Thoughts About Vocation to The Religious Life and to The Celibate Priesthood

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My thoughts about vocation to the Religious Life and to the celibate priesthood and the widespread current crisis, have been simmering in a huge chicken, carrot and noodle soup pot for quite a while. Here I would like to skim off briefly a few of my “conclusions”. Each conclusion will then need a whole essay to elaborate it or clarify it.

Part One - Two Sources Of Wonder

It hit me about five years ago that the most utterly stunning and amazing facts or realities of which I, as a Catholic Christian, am conscious come from two radically different sources. They have either been discovered by human beings using their senses and their God-given powers of reason to work on the data fed to them by their senses. Or they have not been discovered by human beings but are believed to have been revealed by God whether through the scriptures or through God the Son, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who became Jesus. In the first category if I were making a short list of stunning marvels it might include:

- 1 www — the whole World Wide Web thing.
- 2 The little rumble in my computer as, at the drop of a key, it changes a colon into a semi-colon on p.189 of my manuscript.
- 3 Transplant surgery.
- 4 The latest digital photography.
- 5 The Voyager/Explorer space probes- what they have told us about our universe.

The second category of stunning realities that, through my faith, I as a Catholic am conscious of might include:

- 1 The God of the universe who is a Trinity of persons chose to become man in Jesus and die for me who am not God so that I might share his trinitarian life for ever. There is no one on the planet to whom this invitation is not extended by God.
- 2 This God wants ongoing intimacy with me so much that he freely offers me each day his own Body and Blood to eat; eating this he tells me (thru St John’s Gospel Ch 6) IS to have eternal life and to have ‘him living in me’.
- 3 All that the eye can SEE (i.e. what we are aware of through the senses) ends up in ashes. Only the world that we BELIEVE IN lasts for ever.
- 4 In the Magisterium Jesus has left behind a sure guide about what is TRUE



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and what is GOOD in Faith and Morals. Peter is a Lighthouse for our lives. He teaches a truth that, if heeded, brings each of us true freedom.

- 5 The present Peter (Pope John Paul II) in his Theology of the Body has provided a map by which we may find our way in the current labyrinthine ways of moral theology especially in the spheres of sexuality and bio-ethics.

All five of the above I hold to be factual rather than fictitious statements, not because any human being discovered them but because God chose to reveal them. Through the gift of FAITH I hold that they are true.

Part Two - What Follows From This

In a world enthusiastic, excited and on a permanent hype about the facts fed to us by our senses, samples of which I gave above, how are we to get people to slow down, turn the machinery off, come aside and pray for a while, give God the time and space He needs to speak to us. If Faith is what leads to ongoing intimacy with God and, here and now, eternal life why have we let those activities that allow faith to be given us or that foster this faith, to be squeezed out from our educational curricula?

Academic planners in high schools know all too well that in today's over-packed, over-active, teeming world of the School Day ACADEMIA ABHORS A VACUUM. "Time slots" that used to be devoted to daily eucharist, Benediction, Reconciliation, Stations of the Cross, Rosary, or other 'devotional' practices easily are taken over by multiple 'good' things that are crying for time and space in the school day. Counseling, Debate Society, Academy of Science, Chess Club, College Counseling, Drama Society etc etc. Good though these are they do not directly nourish that faith dimension which enables our young men and women to grow directly in their intimacy and love of the Lord Jesus. If this relationship does not grow then their call to holiness will likewise be jeopardized. It is the educational culture that has decided in so many schools, so many Catholic schools, over the last thirty years or so that it is not of prime importance to Catholic education that our students be fed with their daily bread. And if they are not fed with the daily Bread of Life we may be quite sure that they will have some misgiving about whether it really can be the Bread of Life and they will feed themselves instead on those fascinating realities that come to them through their senses via the media and more recently the www.

If they are not taught from earliest years the importance of reconciliation and given the habit of going humbly and simply regularly to a priest to have themselves forgiven of their peccadilloes that, as adolescence moves in, may become more serious and then can bloom into bad habits - habits of impurity, pornography, drinking, drugs, disobedience, disrespect, neglect of prayer, even arrogance..etc they will not come to consider this sacrament important.



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If we do not share these sacraments confidently with them as part of their Catholic education then the faith gift, so small a flame these days in who knows what huge a darkness, may easily be extinguished.

Part Three

It is on the basis of this faith vision that vocations are heard. If we do not nourish the faith vision daily by prayer and the sacraments, especially eucharist and reconciliation, in our schools and colleges how can we expect our students to find them important? After all the whole of 'academe' has its established hierarchy of authority. Isn't this what becoming a Bachelor or Master or Doctor is all about? Aren't THEY the ones who have the knowledge, the expertise and therefore the authority? If the educational boards, the principals, the presidents of Catholic Universities are going along with the way things manifestly are well, who am I, a current Catholic student might humbly feel, to think otherwise? Furthermore if, in our eucharist, at that most intimate time when God, who, like us, can only love individuals, (such is the nature of love between the Persons of the Trinity) has a few precious minutes to commune with love and be loved by THIS ONE PERSON (each of these 300 loved individuals!) if, as I say this moment arrives and is regularly blazed into or trumpeted out by beautiful but prayer-pre-empting choral music...in these circumstances how difficult it is for God to penetrate these privileged moments. I find that almost never does there occur that special 'Taizé-type' stunning and unifying-silence that is supremely suitable for divine disclosure. Instead should some overlooked fragment of silence survive, while extraordinary ministers are still working at their ministry of purifying the vessels (they're people too, by the way, who deserve a little silence for their own personal thanksgiving!) the Chair says LET US PRAY and the rite concludes to be followed immediately by the scamper of little feet and the highly appropriate socializing of the people of God after their weekly liturgy. But who knows what moments of listening, what thoughts of life-demanding consecrations, may not have been forthcoming in such carefully cherished silences had such silences been more safely protected by our eager liturgists and guarded by the new rubrics. Aren't rubrics there specially to protect from disorder or trivializing the awe-inspiring dimensions of our liturgies?

Part Four - Spousal Love — Consecrated Celibacy Itself

At one place in VITA CONSECRATA the Holy Father talks of the consecrated life as 'spousal.' It is as if his editors had their backs turned and he slipped it in when they weren't watching. Everybody has been trying to give reasons for consecrated celibacy for the last thirty or forty years without using the 'spousal' word. Have we lost our power to think in analogy? As a poet I am more at home with symbol, figure, metaphor, simile and analogy sometimes than I am with the world of literal meaning. But our world with its numbers and measurement is uneasy with anything that can't be securely defined! So I have never had any



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difficulty with lifting the appropriate parts of the spousal image that apply to male or female consecrated celibacy and letting drop those that do not apply. This is how we operate instinctively whenever we see metaphor or simile at work in prose or poetry.

The Spouse gives ALL.

The Spouse gives UNCONDITIONALLY.

The Spouse gives in a way that is UNIQUE to the Beloved.

If I understand this and, through my faith, perhaps at times of eucharist or silent prayer or in a canoe or on a mountain, my Lord asks me whether I would like to give myself to Him in this kind of total loving and consecration, I will most probably say: “Who me? You gotta be kidding! You, the Lord of this Universe that Explorer II has just shown us is hugely vaster than we could possibly have imagined, want spousal love from ME? Lord, I am not worthy. But if you insist it might be rather fun! And I know the Church would have to approve so that I would know it wasn’t just one more of my crazy ideas.”

In comparison with which I find the Instrumentum Laboris on the reasons for celibacy in the consecrated life somewhat tame. It sounds, forgive me, more like job descriptions in a theological Want Ad. Of course they do use the Vatican II word that reminds us that consecrated celibacy is the great ‘eschatological sign’—but I must confess that even in my days of theology at Fribourg, back in 1966, I found ‘eschatological’ to be one of those theological concepts that was very intellectual and not something that I felt like giving my life for. It was also something of a conversation stopper!

It is as Brides of Christ that we are drawn into consecrated celibacy and if we’re short on analogy we would do well to take a quick review course in it rather than attempt to side-step it by using the current theological jargon. To be chosen by the Lord to be one who, ‘for the sake of the Kingdom’, chooses to have no created person but the Lord himself as my Spouse. So that through this unique union I am able to love each of God’s individual chosen people with the love of Christ himself. The immense privilege of this kind of choice by God is bound to leave us humble and wondering whether there has not been some mistake. But, as I said above, the Bishop, the Abbot, the Mother Superior, the Formation Team are all there, in the providence of God, to assure us, and The Church, that this ‘heavenly marriage’ as Christopher West calls it, has in fact been made in heaven; that it is in fact what the Lord has chosen me for.

What a huge blessing it is that in our Roman Catholic church the Holy Spirit continues to desire this unique spousal relationship with each of her priests. As if the Trinity were saying: “We wish to guard by this spousal bond of unique and



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absolute love for us those called to represent Jesus in re-presenting each day his sacrifice. Their hearts must be woven into ours in that spousal union that places no other person in the world before us.”

This is the reason behind clerical celibacy and this is, in today’s world of mind-boggling attractions and distractions, for our wayward, sin-scarred hearts, more needed than ever before.

Conclusions

The Internet tells us that in August 1977 Voyager II left the earth at a speed of 90,000 m.p.h. By December 28 2001 it had traveled 8,332,000,000 miles since launching and its speed, relative to the earth, was 82,501 m.p.h. Scientists reckon that it will take about 40,000 years to pass the boundaries of cometary space. By then it will have traveled a distance of two light years. This is about half the distance to PROXIMA CENTAURI, the nearest star. It is estimated that there are some 100,000 stars in our galaxy and that there may be as many as 100,000 galaxies.

How small we are in the universe as we peer out through our God-given eyes and digest the data with our God-given reason!

How marvelous that the God who holds all this in being, our faith tells us, became one like us so that each of us might have the opportunity of sharing the life of the Trinity!

What can we do to create space and time in our lives and the lives of our children to receive more of this gift of faith, this vision, that our loving God, precisely because of His love, wants us to have?

For people in Catholic Education, —whether K thru 8th Grade, 9 thru 12th, or College and beyond — what implications lie here for curricula? For schedules that nurture and create space for prayer, eucharist, reconciliation, retreats, community service, days of recollection, Faculty prayer, Lectio, Faculty education and catechesis? How can we stand against the ‘measurement-is-the-ultimate-test-of-reality’ mentality? How can we cope with the huge tendency of the reason/sense-fed data machine to spread its tentacles into everything?

The Second Vatican Council clearly baptized scientific knowledge. “Where there is truth there is the Holy Spirit” was implicit and explicit in many of its decrees. But haven’t we let this muddy the waters about what we know through faith and what we have found out, as mentioned above, through reason working on the input from our senses? As Hans Urs von Balthasar reminded us we are called to ‘Do theology on our knees.’ It is through prayer and the sacraments that we are led by the Holy Spirit ever deeper into the mysteries of our faith. In prayer we are



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humbly told by God how much He loves us and what this means. As we glimpse what it means we are filled with awe. The sacrament of penance helps us, month by month or week by week, remove the cataracts of sin that develop on the eye of faith and thereby cloud our vision of these mysteries. The Bread of Life deepens our union with our beloved God in these mysteries. And in our times of prayer we hear more clearly the voice of our Lord calling us to what He wants from us:

“I have come not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me.”