

Vatican II and the Year of Faith: Celibate Priests and the Married Faithful

How can a celibate priest help me to live a successful marriage? A Protestant Christian recently put this challenge to me. In his mind, only a married pastor could understand the challenges of marriage. He could not understand how a celibate Catholic priest could possibly counsel me effectively. The truth, however, is that the celibate Catholic priest is uniquely qualified to help the married faithful.

The fundamental truth about Christian celibacy and Christian marriage is that they are both aimed at precisely the same good. The Catechism teaches that "the entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church." (1617) Whether in marriage or in consecrated virginity, the Christian puts his sexuality at the service of others, gives himself entirely for the good of others, in imitation of our Lord. For this reason, the Catechism continues, "Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other." (1620)

There are also at least three, very practical ways that the priestly vocation serves my married vocation. They are ways that surpass any possible benefit I might derive from counsel from another married layperson.

The first benefit I receive from the celibate priesthood is instruction in the proper meaning of marriage. Christian marriage is a sacrament. Christian marriage is indissoluble. And Christian marriage is necessarily open to the transmission of human life. Unfortunately, these are truths that nearly all married Protestant clergy deny. However much human experience a Protestant clergyman may possess, he cannot possibly instruct me in successful marriage when he does not know himself what marriage is. The celibate Catholic priest, however, receives his teaching mission from the Celibate Priest Jesus Christ. It is Christ who elevated Christian marriage to a sacrament, and it is Christ who commanded his apostles to transmit this teaching to the Church until the end of time.

The second benefit I receive from the celibate priesthood is sacramental grace to live out my marriage vows. Marriage is not easy. It requires constant self-sacrifice, laying down my life for the good of the other, even as Christ gave himself for the good of the Church. It also requires an ongoing repentance and ongoing forgiveness. These are things that I cannot do apart from the grace of God. And I receive these graces through the ministrations of Christ's holy priest. In the sacrament of reconciliation, I receive forgiveness for my wrongs, I learn humility, and I learn to extend forgiveness to my spouse and others. In the Holy Eucharist, I receive Him who gave himself for me. I also receive the grace to offer myself for the good of the other.

The third benefit I receive from the celibate priest (and from all consecrated religious) is a shining example of that chastity that is absolutely essential to the married state. I submit that a successful marriage has more with saying no to an unbridled sexual passion than yielding to it. Pope Pius XI wrote, "For matrimonial faith demands that husband and wife be joined in an especially holy and pure love, not as adulterers love each other, but as Christ loved the Church." (*Casti Connubii*)

Both marriage and consecrated life are about putting my sexuality in service to the other. In marriage, I give of myself in the transmission of human life, and in the care and education of children. In priestly celibacy or consecrated life, the religious vocation aims at a spiritual fecundity, the rearing of children in the Lord, and at a closer and more intimate consecration to Christ. Many times over the years, I have drawn strength for my marriage by contemplating the more perfect consecration of priests and religious. This is something I could by no means receive in the same degree from a married Protestant minister.

The Second Vatican Council reflected deeply on this special vocation of the Catholic priest, and his service to the lay faithful. The document *Presbyterorum Ordinis* speaks about the priest's special consecration to Christ in his celibate vocation, and the example he sets concerning the true meaning of Christian marriage. We read:

In this way they profess themselves before men as willing to be dedicated to the office committed to them—namely, to commit themselves faithfully to one man and to show themselves as a chaste virgin for Christ and thus to evoke the mysterious marriage established by Christ, and fully to be manifested in the future, in which the Church has Christ as her only Spouse. They give, moreover, a living sign of the world to come, by a faith and charity already made present, in which the children of the resurrection neither marry nor take wives.

This past week our diocese celebrated the ordination of three new priests, and my thoughts have been going to them frequently in thanksgiving for their vocations. As I watched them process down the aisle to the bishop, their joy was palpable, their love and sense of mission were infectious. I watched spellbound as they prostrated themselves, and vowed lifelong fidelity to the Church, to service, to the people of God, and to the Sacrificial worship that is the Holy Mass. What better example for marriage could I possibly find?