

HOW CAN EVANGELICAL CELIBACY BE AUTHENTIC?

By LOUIS ROY

AT PRESENT celibacy is a cause of suffering and questioning both for those on whom it has been imposed by circumstances, and for those who have freely chosen it. In this article I propose to point out the links which exist between the psychic, social and religious dimensions of our being and to place celibacy as a positive value at the very centre of the interactions between these dimensions. I shall usually speak of 'celibate people' so as to include not only religious, both men and women, but also priests, members of secular institutes and those who have lost husband or wife or who have not married and who are trying to find a christian meaning to their situation. I am also conscious that many considerations relevant to the discussion on celibacy have a bearing on marriage and married people as well. Far from invalidating what I have to say, these similarities illustrate the fact that the different evangelical states of life are so many contexts in which the same basic traits of human nature are combined.

The psycho-socio-religious context of the problem

While modern medical science has extended our expectation of life, modern psychology has suddenly intensified for westerners the hope of personal happiness through self-fulfilment. Perhaps one of the most obvious consequences of this is the common belief that it is impossible to be fully oneself if one renounces the exercise of one's sexuality. Sexuality is seen as a positive energy which permeates our whole being and urges us to share our intimate life and to give expression to this sharing. In this mental climate chastity appears as a complete aberration, an unhealthy attempt to sublimate and spiritualize our personality and altogether to deny its bodily aspect.

Besides being influenced by this western psychological atmosphere, religious men and women, like many single persons, are more or less cut off from social and political life. In so far as their work is no longer clearly in favour of the liberation of socially deprived people, their celibacy loses its evangelical relevance. There is a connection, not usually well understood, between psychological unease about celibacy and the defective social stance taken up by those who have chosen that state of life, and I will take up this point again later in the article.

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We have not yet touched, however, on the thorniest aspect of the crisis: a distressing absence of religious meaning. This is due to what is commonly called 'secularization', a phenomenon in which I would distinguish two factors: the 'functionalization' of institutions, and the 'paganization' of thought. The first consists in this, that institutions (in industry, for example, or commerce, education and health services) set aside all christian reference and concentrate on certain extremely specialized objectives. The second factor ('paganization') refers to the fact that people's thinking today is neither secular nor christian. On the one hand, disappointed by the results of technology and politics, many of our contemporaries are attracted by what we may term 'religiosity'. On the other hand, most of them are no longer christian in the sense of a total commitment in faith. People are ready to reap the benefits of religion but hesitate to accept the basic challenge of the gospel.

This paganization of minds even in the case of very many who call themselves Christians is shown, among other things, by a double crisis: the crisis of chastity and the crisis of prayer. The two have this in common that they point us to what is properly religious in christianity, if one understands 'religious' to mean accepting a relationship with God. This is why I think it is important to note the fact that these two values suffer more than others from the paganization of thought, and I shall explore this more fully in the final part of the article. First of all, however, I want to deal with two preliminary matters: to discuss the possibility of a celibacy which is psychologically healthy and to show how the conscious assumption of responsibility for our own spiritual personhood implies a growth which must proceed at one and the same time on the psychological, social and religious levels.

An unacceptable price to pay?

In the opinion of many lucid and honest observers, those who choose celibacy for a religious motive give the impression of paying an excessive price in the sacrifice of human and religious values. Their will to remain faithful often seems to rely on a mixture of rigidity and of naïveté with regard to their psychological make-up. We admit that a certain distance is to be expected between the call to live the beatitudes and the concrete attitudes and actions of an individual. But what is discouraging for people who are looking for authenticity is that many celibate people, far from diminishing this distance, invoke religious principles to justify accepting it, and become tacitly resigned to living a life which is less than fully human. Their gospel ideal then prevents them from being fully themselves. And to be frank, one must admit that this lack of

honesty, for the most part unconscious, affects not only the unbalanced but also those whose psyche functions relatively well. The current understanding of evangelical celibacy includes a traditional prudence which suggests that one renounce firmly that part of one's being on which one's whole vitality, all one's powers of intimate communications, feeling and emotion depend. So first I would like to answer with a certain rigorous exactness the basic question: does evangelical celibacy necessarily mean the repression of a natural human need? In my opinion, if that were so, the price to pay would be excessive and unacceptable.

Is the exercise of sexuality a need? If one defines a need as something absolutely necessary to life like drinking or eating it is clear that the exercise of sexuality is not a need. Many people have lived and live without exercising their sexuality in the usual way. An objection which is quite trivial in itself can, however, lead us to define precisely different ways of understanding sexuality. Would sexual activity in dreams not be a necessary compensation? If one understands by sexuality the activity of genitality, we must admit that it is not necessary to exercise it consciously, for our biological nature is so constituted that it takes care of its glandular balance in dreams.

The second question, is this: is the exercise of sexuality a psychological need, something necessary for the fulfilment of spiritual personhood? There are two kinds of psychic need. The first kind, in human beings as in animals, sets in motion the pursuit of the pleasure one experiences in expressing one's vitality in the sexual act. This is definitely not a purely physical happening, a sort of automatic mechanism; it is a game in which man and woman feel, make actual and symbolize the one his masculinity, the other her femininity. The need in question has as its aim the satisfaction which one feels as a sexual being in relation to someone of the opposite sex.

The second form of psychological need is connected with a more profound meaning of sexuality, namely the desire to enter into interpersonal relationship and together to create life. This need has to do with being recognized for one's personal worth which is unique and yet of the same nature as that of the other. 'Here . . . is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Gen 2,23). In this case the desire can only be completely satisfied by the joy which is felt when the other, whom I appreciate and whose presence I desire, not only responds to my expectation, but shows in that response a pronounced attraction and a sincere attachment in regard to what I myself am. The fact of recognizing reciprocally that each is important to the other is the only thing which can satisfy a thirst which remains deep down in us, even if life's disappointments have more or less succeeded in blunting our sensibility.

Reflecting on this double need, we may observe that it can be more or less satisfied in the case of a celibate person in relationships with persons of the same or the opposite sex without there being necessarily a question of a genital relationship. The world of work and leisure is a sphere where the sexes mix freely and in which sexuality comes constantly into play in the form of charm, conquest or reserve intermingled in ever varying patterns which are determined by the spontaneous interaction of personalities. These relations, now pleasant, now unpleasant, at one time frustrating, at another of passionate interest, form an important dimension of life even in the midst of the most arduous work or the most absorbing leisure. I do not see why religious men or women should cut themselves off from this. Not to recognize that dimension of our existence would be, it seems to me, to entertain a serious illusion. All that one ought to expect of a person who wishes to remain celibate is for him or her to discern the difference between the appreciation one has for someone and exclusive love which involves more than friendship. It would be a mistake to believe that a genital relationship gives more pleasure on the psychological level than one of friendship. The difference in satisfaction between interpersonal appreciation, friendship and physical union is not to be measured only in terms of the type of relationship enjoyed; the profit depends also on the quality of liberty and love reached by the persons involved.

If we take these two forms of psychological need, it is evident that by choosing celibacy we give up the pleasure and satisfaction which accompany the play of reciprocal and complete physical exchange. It is equally clear that we renounce the joy of being recognized, welcomed and loved with the wholeness, the exclusiveness, and the fecundity which characterize a stable couple. I am convinced that we need (I was going to say, good reasons, but it is more than that) a special and particular experience of God and of Jesus crucified, to be able to consent to this sacrifice with full peace of mind. On the other hand, we ought to perceive clearly that if we imagine our sexual need purely and simply as a need to exercise our sexuality genitally or even to exercise it in an exclusive, stable way with one other person, we are making a caricature of our humanity, dividing it sharply by a false dichotomy of all or nothing. In this case sexuality would be wholly involved in marriage and not at all involved in celibacy. In fact our sexuality is involved in one way or another in all human relationships, and a constantly changing combination of satisfactions, pleasures and frustrations results from it.

The only practical conclusion that follows from this discussion about sexual need, it seems to me, is that evangelical celibacy does not necessarily imply a truncation of our humanity for it allows us to

satisfy the double sexual need in a network of human relationships whose religious balance is different from that of married people. Christian celibacy proves itself sane and healthy if it allows someone to grow as a person, in humanity, and this becomes possible in the measure in which one tries seriously to improve one's interpersonal relations. This development cannot be complete, however, if it does not include and unite the three levels which I mentioned earlier: psychological, social and religious.

'Doing the truth' on three levels

In this psycho-socio-religious context of the problem of the celibate, it will not be found too surprising if I borrow the johannine expression of 'doing the truth' to indicate the solution to the threefold unease which affects celibate people today. 'Everyone who does what is wrong hates the light and avoids it for fear his actions should be exposed; but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God' (Jn 3,20-21). If we apply the inspiration which Jesus here offers us to our concrete situation today we can affirm that the adventure of evangelical celibacy (and it is the same for christian marriage) only has meaning if it advances progressively, albeit never completely in this life, from darkness to light on the psychological and social as well as the religious level. And this journey seems to me full of hope: the bible encourages us to look on our fear of coming to the light in the context of a salvation in which psychic, social and religious elements are inseparably bound up together.

On the psychological level ordinary growth reveals that, in the measure that celibacy is an ideal and not an experience, there is a risk that the cost in human values will be great. The ideal in question means proposing to oneself the goal of being consecrated to God and of maintaining towards others attitudes of availability, service and the gift of self. On the other hand a true experience consists in grasping the difference between our real dispositions, characterized by so many ambiguities, and those of Jesus, while entertaining the desire and the hope that little by little this distance will be diminished, by grace. The ideal is at one time naïve, at another untruthful. It obscures the fact that a number of the celibate's frustrated desires tend to be satisfied under a multitude of forms: seeking to have influence, success and power, affective compensations, attitudes of aggression and dominance, lack of openness, excessive introversion, escapism, generous actions due to feeling of culpability and so on. Faced with the challenge of conversion at this level it seems to me that no individual can find the way out alone and that christian and religious communities should be environ-

ments which help to identify these psychological facts and give support on the journey towards authenticity. For celibacy to have witness value in our society it must be lived by people who recognize and admit their psychological and moral deficiencies not just in a general way but specifically, and who receive as a grace from God the fact of being committed to a process of healing. Their witness must express at once a realistic humility, joy at seeing the quality of their interpersonal relations improve; and it should radiate goodness and very sensitive kindness in the way they accept and welcome others.

The way towards this transformation of the psyche is not always a straight one. The initial choice of celibacy implies a renouncing which can be made either with mature serenity, if one is aware of what one is doing, or with a greater or lesser measure of repression with regard to the excluded values. This psychological repression prepares the way for an eventual revolt of the emotions against the unrelieved seriousness of life, the burden of religious duties, the constraints of the moral law — in short, the excessive price to be paid in order to remain faithful to a commitment which appears abstract and formal. This revolt results from the double psychological need which we pointed out was basic to human nature and perfectly legitimate.

This breaking out of the framework is for many the occasion of psychic growth and of a deepening of the religious significance of celibacy. In the beginning the emotional climate of such a meeting of persons tends to prevent them clearly perceiving the consequences of a reciprocal conquest. Later on in the relationship either the consequences which would demand a permanent commitment are refused and the two remain at a certain distance from each other; or the conquest results in just one more friendship among others; or a privileged friendship is formed and develops progressively to a point where it becomes evident that it could not be broken up without inhumanity both to the other person and to oneself. In all these cases there is no cause for shame for the simple reason that one can only develop psychologically by playing one's part in the world of interpersonal relationships in which sexuality is necessarily involved. The important thing is to try to be more and more conscious of what is happening in oneself and in the other person, which is only possible with help from outside. Openness and dialogue with a counsellor who respects the value and claims of evangelical celibacy make it possible to find criteria of discernment. In the case of a privileged relationship between two celibate persons, of which certain spiritual masters have recently upheld the human and christian value, I think that what is needed is not to take flight

or to lay down artificial limits but to see clearly the inevitable ambiguity of the motivation involved and to weigh up the difficulties met with and the gains for each person in terms of psychological growth. In such a situation, given the many different ways in which celibate persons have been able to enrich each other, I think that to refuse to revise the traditional prohibitions is to hide one's head in the sand. However, an important question arises: is the permanence of an exclusive relationship or the formation of a stable friendship deeply involving two people equivalent to a denial of the radical significance of evangelical celibacy? Whether or not genital expression is given to the friendship is in my opinion a secondary question, if we are considering a union of heart and feelings which is practically identical with that of married people. I am inclined to think that the answer depends on the nature of our call to union with God, in the likeness of that of Jesus. With this in mind the practical question then becomes: how can we act so that this friendship remains true while shedding its all-invading and exclusive character?

Encounter with others which engages our whole person is not fully satisfying while it remains merely individual, it needs to broaden out into activity which is socially useful and which constitutes the second aspect of the triple liberation in which celibacy gives its witness. If our work and our diverse forms of involvement are to be informed by gospel values, our criteria for ministry must be firmly based on a social conscience. Insecure about their future, repressing their fears of a possible catastrophe through thermo-nuclear accident, men and women today remain immersed in immediate pleasures and superficial values. In this setting is it not the mission of celibates who have chosen their state for the sake of the gospel, and who are socially aware and active, to contest this gigantic psychological blockage? Celibacy for the kingdom incarnates its meaning by a critical examination of situations like this, for the kingdom suffers violence in the measure in which the realization of God's social intention for mankind is obstructed. And this critical examination should be paralleled by a modest but well thought-out involvement designed to change the nature of political structures and psychological relations in some sphere of daily living. Only in the midst of such a combat can certain advantages of celibacy play a really positive role: poverty, mobility, freedom to risk one's reputation and so on. In opposition to today's philosophy which is an opiate for exploiters and exploited alike, setting before them as desirable a superficial happiness impregnated with eroticism, celibate people with an awakened social conscience can witness to the fact that joy is not to be found purely and simply in physical sexual union

but flows from the sort of encounter with God and with others which gives meaning to life in as much as it pursues true values, material, psychological and spiritual.

Interacting with the psychological and social dimensions of our human liberation, religious experience constitutes the third level at which we need to take up the challenge to 'do the truth'. The fact of maturing on the psychological and social levels already brings with it important repercussions on the religious level, but it can never replace that concert of intuitions and acts of will by which we open ourselves to an incomparable Presence. Two convictions seem to me to be of particular importance, but only if they are acquired personally. The first results from the discovery that a source exists from which flow all the streams of life and energy which make psychic and social growth and change possible. Christians can be proud of the fact that God, in Jesus, has pitched his tent in the heart of our inauthenticities and weaknesses, showing us a way to authentic life in the cross and the resurrection. Thus, those who have chosen celibacy for the sake of the world's final liberation answer the call to imitate and prolong the life of Jesus, desiring to be as close as possible both to this source of goodness and to those who are dying of thirst because they cannot drink from it.

The second conviction concerns the surpassing value of God who is love, and the nature beyond all our hopes of our meeting with him who puts himself within our reach because he loves us passionately for what we are. I believe that the mystery of our selfhood as human beings holds within it a deep yearning which explains all we do or undertake: that of being appreciated and unconditionally desired. 'God saw all that he made, and it was very good' (Gen 1,31). Those who in celibacy consecrate their being directly to God, whatever the sluggishness or doubts which characterize their journey towards him, have been won over to the pursuit of something of absolutely fascinating interest, that is, an interpersonal encounter with God.

The human person can only be integrated if all his or her energies converge and meet in the search for a single great good. Awareness on the psychological level promotes conscious control of these energies. Awareness on the social level leads an individual to come out of himself and to put his energies at the service of others. Awareness on the religious level allows us to identify the source of these energies and to enter into contact with him who alone cares about us to the degree which can satisfy us. Whether they are celibate or married, Christians seeking authenticity cannot neglect any of these levels if they desire to correspond to that plan which God has, to bestow on each and all the gift of perfect liberation.

Coming face to face with our inmost being

Since religious experience is the keystone of evangelical celibacy, I want to show in this last section how the meeting with God demands that we come face to face with our intimate selves in solitude and prayer. Indeed, evangelical celibacy loses its meaning if those who have committed themselves to it renounce the effort to come to terms with the inherent solitude of this state of life, and to embark on the self-emptying or self-stripping which the adventure of personal prayer or meditation requires.

One's ability to relate in depth to others is in proportion to one's ability to relate to oneself. Since this becomes more marked as we advance, all well-directed progress is characterized by an alternation of contact with others and withdrawal with oneself. Contact-withdrawal, presence to another-presence to oneself, interdependence-autonomy, union-solitude, constitute natural pairs.

Religious celibacy emphasizes in an original way, different from that of marriage, the importance of these pairs in a process of psycho-social liberation. The solitude which it entails leads us to question our sexuality seen as a dynamic force moving us to form relationships. It tends to lay bare the ambiguity of the need which we have of others. As we allow ourselves to be challenged by questions, we find we can count less and less on the good we used to predict of ourselves or on the methods we were accustomed to use to win esteem or affection. In the midst of this trial our attention to God makes us more conscious of the fact that solitude is a very faithful ally.

As a complement to this first way of facing up to our interior life, the practice of meditation enables those who give themselves to it to send down roots into the very deepest part of themselves. The effect with regard to our imagined good points is the same as before; we are stripped of illusions. Personal prayer tries and strengthens our motivation with regard to our relationship with God. Silence strengthens little by little our openness to God and dissipates little by little our spontaneous self-interest. We learn to overcome our feeling of uselessness and to become patient when face to face with emptiness, when we discover that this void is a sign of the presence of him who is utterly different from ourselves. The chief role of emptiness is to show us what we are: beings of desire who cannot attain to satisfaction through their own activity nor give themselves their own fulfilment even with the help of other humans. Distinct from all neurotic and schizophrenic experiences (with which, notwithstanding, it may co-exist) this emptiness allows us to experience existentially our basic human condition: that it is only from another that we can receive our life, our joy, our love.

Just as any human involvement is life-giving only to those who give themselves to it heart and soul, so evangelical celibacy has lasting meaning only in the context of total gift of self to God. If one is not disposed to come face to face with one's intimate self in solitude and prayer, the religious edifice is without a keystone to hold it in place. The withdrawal which celibacy supposes and the inactivity which characterizes meditation certainly represent two elements of christian life which resist all rational justification. They constitute a challenge to common sense and at the same time an uncompromising test for the faith of the Church. Indeed one dare undertake them only if one trusts in the example of Jesus, of Mary and of many witnesses of the gospel who, through the ages, have answered the call to celibacy and to prayer and who have discovered that the road is not a *cul de sac*. If these two realities prove themselves very trying thorns in our pagan flesh, they are nonetheless, for many, two doors which open wide on to the mystery of man and the mystery of God. With insistence and discretion, an interior voice invites a certain number of Christians to go further into that experience of fulness and emptiness which is the encounter with God.

The crisis of celibacy and the crisis of personal prayer, converging as they do, reveal a crisis in faith in the contemporary Church. And yet when all has been said, while a sentimental religiosity is ready to admit the existence of God as an intermittent presence, does not the gospel for its part communicate a passion for the living reality of a lover who loves us for what we are and who is longing to be loved for what he is?¹

¹ An extended version of this article has appeared in French in *La vie des communautés religieuses*, 40, April 1982 (Montreal). We are grateful to Sister Agnes Hartung, S.H.C.J., for help with the translation.