

CELIBACY AND INTIMACY

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IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH over the centuries celibate people have offered married people their perspective on the meaning of marriage. In this article I hope to reverse this trend by offering my perspective as a married woman on the meaning of celibacy! But first let me explain how my interest in celibacy came about.

When I got married I promised to love my partner and to be faithful to him for life. For many years I assumed that this promise of fidelity meant that I should love only one man. While I was busy having a family I had no reason to question this assumption. However as years went by I became involved in community life. I began to see that there was a contradiction between my assumption about loving only one man and Christ's instruction to love my neighbour. So I asked myself – how can I be true to my commitment to my husband and yet relate in a meaningful and loving – rather than a superficial or remote – way to other men? Finally after a great deal of questioning I found what was – in theory at least – a simple solution. I could love others – but I had to love them in a celibate way. It was at that point that my interest in celibacy began!

Since then I have run many workshops on celibacy and related subjects for religious and priests. Consequently I have become convinced that the experience of sacramental married love can help to illuminate vowed celibacy.

As I understand it each of these vocations witnesses to a particular dimension of God's love. Marriage witnesses to the personal dimension. Celibacy witnesses to the universal dimension.

Having reflected on my own journey I realize that the call to universal love lies at the heart of – is in fact an outcome of – the personal experience of love. Having journeyed deeply into a vocation of personal love I found that I eventually arrived at the point where the vowed celibate vocation begins. Personal love had evolved towards love of neighbour. So my lived experience of married love corroborated the celibates' conviction that love is universal. I began to understand that this conviction underlies vowed celibacy when it is voluntarily assumed. My task now – and it is a lifelong one – is to integrate the personal and the universal dimensions of love into my married life.

As I continued my exploration I asked myself, does the same process happen in reverse for the celibate person? Does the celibate also, at some

point, have to integrate the universal and personal dimensions of love into her or his life? Having struggled – perhaps for years – to love people without discrimination and thus witness to God’s universal love, does the celibate journey eventually lead a person to a point where she or he is called to love some one particular individual in a deeply personal way? Does the journey of the celibate into universal love eventually corroborate the married person’s experience that all love – of its very nature – must also be deeply personal? Can a celibate person love everyone universally if she or he has never struggled to give love to, and receive love from, one significant person in an intimate and personal way?

How effective is the witness of a celibate person if he or she never faces the issue of intimacy which is inherently present in every human relationship? How can a celibate person become aware of this issue and learn to resolve it, unless it surfaces in a concrete and specific form in relationship with particular human beings?

In the rest of this article I will try to address this issue of intimacy and friendship in the life of the celibate. As space is limited I will focus on one specific and often problematic aspect of intimacy i.e. physical intimacy. I will discuss whether such intimacy is appropriate for the celibate; if so what form it might take, and what role it might play in the celibate’s life.

Intimacy

I believe that anyone who wishes to minister to others needs to be able to create and to tolerate a wholesome form of intimacy with others. Intimacy is a way of being with oneself and others. It is a stance one adopts in the whole of one’s life. It is an attitude of truth and authenticity: an open space between oneself and others which is free of physical distaste, emotional blocks and intellectual prejudice. It is about availability. It is about appropriate, relevant and truthful disclosure in every relationship. It is about revealing vulnerability as well as strength. It is about transparency. It can exist not only in private relationships – though that is usually where one first learns about it – it can exist in public relationships too. In its presence people feel deeply moved: they feel invited to change and to grow. In this kind of intimacy a person is fully present to others and so God is present too. Unfortunately, however, the formation for ministry which was offered to most celibate people until recently did not encourage this kind of intimacy.

The formation of celibate people

Human beings are incarnate spirits. The human spirit manifests itself through the body and the emotions as well as through the intellect. So in

order to be fully present to others – in order that spirit may touch spirit – people should not deliberately exclude any one of these dimensions of their personality from their relationships. Instead they must search for truthful and appropriate ways of being present to others on all these levels. If they exclude and deny aspects of themselves, their presence may end up being destructive rather than growthful for others.

This destructiveness is obvious in pornographic relationships. The emotional and to a large degree the intellectual dimension are omitted and the pornographer relates to another person on the physical level only. This dehumanizes both the other person and the pornographer himself.

Until quite recently many candidates for the religious life were encouraged by formation programmes to neglect or suspect the physical and emotional dimensions of relationships and to relate to others in a purely intellectual way. It seems to me that this advice – if taken seriously – was just as dehumanizing as pornographic relating. Indeed in many ways it was more damaging, because it was more insidious. If questioned, people could become self-righteous and could justify their behaviour by the use of religious arguments. Therefore the destructiveness was much more difficult to expose.

The emotional dimension must not be excluded because emotion can modify, civilize and humanize physical desire. The physical dimension cannot be excluded either. We cannot leave our bodies outside of our relationships and so, one way or another, our bodies speak. Therefore instead of excluding these dimensions of the personality from relationships, the celibate must find ways of integrating them into her or his life.

In order to suggest how this might be done I would like to look now at the physical dimension of the married relationship – specifically at sexual intercourse, which is one of the more obvious things which a vowed celibate gives up. If we can understand what is happening during intercourse we can then ask – can the same effect(s) be brought about by other means in celibate friendship?

Physical intimacy in marriage

The very word intercourse implies some kind of communication between two people. So what is being communicated during sexual intercourse? Obviously there is the communication of physical pleasure or at least there is the possibility of this. Physical pleasure is very important because it puts a couple in touch with the goodness/Godness of their own sexuality – of their own bodiliness.

However, although physical pleasure is important, it is only a transitory sensation. It cannot be grasped and retained. So is there

something more enduring being conveyed? I believe that in addition to the transitory element of pleasure there are two enduring elements in the experience.

The first enduring element

Sexual intercourse which forms part of a loving relationship is a very powerful way of accepting the physical being of another person. In the sexual act this acceptance is communicated to the other through touch. Loving intercourse is an affirming experience, in which each partner by delighting in the other reveals to the other the wholesomeness and beauty of his or her body. The message which is communicated is this: you and your body are good, you and your body are acceptable, you and your body are lovable. This knowledge is stored in the body – it is lodged in the bones and in the flesh. It becomes an intrinsic part of that person's being and so he or she acts in accordance with that knowledge when relating with people from then on.

This knowledge of a person's own loveliness which is taught in a loving intimate relationship is one enduring element of the experience.

The second enduring element

The knowledge about a person's own loveliness and acceptability is transmitted – not in the language of words but in the language of touch. This message is received by a partner – not first and foremost in his or her mind, but in her or his body. So a person gradually learns that the body is a centre of intelligence – that it can receive, store and interpret messages. And that it can be used – quite consciously – to transmit messages too. So a new means of communicating – a new language – is gradually learned. This language is then permanently at the person's disposal.

This language – the language of the adult body – builds on the rudimentary physical language learned in childhood. And if the language which was taught in childhood was damaging it can help to neutralize and counteract this. This language of the body is the second element which endures.

So while the element of physical pleasure does not endure, these other two elements – (a) the knowledge of one's own loveliness and (b) the means – i.e. the physical language – whereby a person can communicate to others their loveliness – do endure.

If the experience of a sexual relationship is reflected upon by couples at a later date, all of this new awareness can be translated into ideas and words. This articulation is important for the Church so that the theology

of human sexuality may be enriched. However, the important thing for each individual – the thing which brings about a personal transformation – is that this information is now stored in the body. It has become part of the person. It is now physically known.

When the fact of a person's own loveliness is known, hang-ups about the adult sexual body disappear. The body can then be used to communicate with others in a more natural and spontaneous way. Body language then begins to mirror and enhance verbal language – there need be no contradiction between the two. When two languages are at a person's disposal he or she can be more fully present to others. Consequently a more profound, more nuanced and therefore more truthful communication of the self takes place.

So loving physical intimacy is a freeing experience. It is a redemptive experience: God through a couple's most intimate gestures frees them to reach out, not only to one another but to others, in self-giving love.

The first few lines of the poem 'Saint Francis and the sow' expresses this idea beautifully:¹

The bud
stands for all things.
Even for those things that don't flower.
For everything flowers, from within, of self blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on the brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing: . . .

Celibate life

Celibate people too need to be 're-taught their own loveliness' because they too must reach out to others in self-giving love. Let us look now at celibate friendship to see how this re-teaching and learning might take place.

If a child lives in a loving environment it is taught that its childish body is lovely. But if adult sexuality is to be fully integrated this teaching needs to continue in adult life.

If celibate people live in total physical isolation, they cannot discover the goodness/Godness of the human body because there is no one there to mirror back that goodness to them. Those who remain physically remote from others often tend to think of the body as somehow

troublesome, unclean, a nuisance – perhaps even as disgusting. They can feel ashamed, bothered or unaccepting of the manifestations of their adult sexuality. They can sometimes even want to marginalize or disown their own bodies altogether. When people reject or deny certain physical aspects of themselves they are not fully present to themselves. Consequently they cannot be fully present to others either.

Celibate friendship offers an opportunity to correct this situation. In friendship celibate people can learn experientially that their sexual body is wholesome and lovable. And they can learn to speak a new language too. However, as the context of this learning is often fraught with pain and dissatisfaction, one must look beneath the surface of a friendship to see how this learning occurs.

Some celibate friendships remain straightforward and uncomplicated. In other friendships sexual attraction and desire enters the picture. Most celibate people – whether heterosexual or homosexual – find it difficult at first to deal with this. Physical desire can be a fairly relentless force. It tends to grow stronger and stronger. It generates an ever increasing interest in, and curiosity about, the physical being of the other person.

This desire is usually something which happens to people rather than something they consciously decide to cultivate. Consequently there should be no moral guilt attached to it. However, many celibates do in fact feel inordinate guilt when they first find themselves in this situation.

Flight is not necessarily the right way to deal with attraction and the desire associated with it – although this of course is a matter for discernment. I believe that the way in which we define an experience determines our options. So if this experience is interpreted as a God-given gift/invitation, rather than as a temptation, it may open up a wider range of choice.

Physical attraction and desire are generally welcomed and enjoyed when both partners are free to pursue their physical interest in one another. Even in celibate friendship it can be a source of joy and excitement to begin with. As physical desire gathers momentum both partners feel an urge to express it in some way. To begin with they may be satisfied with small gestures. However as desire grows the urge to go further grows too. Eventually the only form of expression which seems adequate or satisfactory is sexual intercourse.

In celibate friendship difficulties arise at this stage. Unexpressed physical desire creates a sense of restlessness which is just about tolerable when there is some hope of it being eventually met. However in a friendship where both partners decide to refrain from full sexual expression, there is no hope of it being met.

Then the sense of restlessness becomes almost unbearable. Sexuality can then be experienced almost as an addiction or an obsession. This in turn leads to a sense of powerlessness in the face of this force and to a feeling that one is no longer in control of one's life in the way in which one used to be. It is an intensely painful and disturbing experience of unfreedom. It is experienced as the tyranny of a physical human need.

Darkness

In First World countries many people never experience the tyranny of other physical needs – such as hunger or the need for shelter. Certainly most vowed celibates – in spite of their vows of poverty – do not. So until this happens to them they may have little idea how physical needs can drive a person to behave in a destructive and less than human way. In friendship a celibate person is invited to look honestly into his or her own heart – to face all the darkness as well as the light that is there. If this is done, then this experience of physical need can generate compassion and deepen a person's understanding of others. And having faced the dark side of his or her own sexuality the celibate person is better able to counteract and be counter-witness to these same dark forces which are loose in the world.

Furthermore if a person can live with this pain long enough to experience it fully and then reflect upon it, she or he will discover that the desire for sex is rooted in the need to be loved. Time – and the painful confrontation with one's own sexual longing – allows this distinction between desire and need to emerge. So the celibate person discovers that while the need for love has to be met, the desire for sex does not. Sexual intercourse is then no longer equated with love. It is seen for what it really is i.e. just one means of expressing love. When this distinction has been discovered experientially, a search can then begin for other forms – celibate forms – of expressing love. This search for celibate forms of expression is very important because the person gradually learns a way of celibate relating which becomes part of his or her public life.

A consummated relationship can show the bright, joyful and pleasurable side of human sexuality – though not all such relationships do. A celibate friendship can make a person aware of the dark, untamed, uncivilized side of the personality. In a very particular way celibate friendship can make a person aware of the need for redemption – of the need to be set free. It can make him or her aware too that she or he cannot just snap fingers and bring this freedom about. This process of becoming free cannot be controlled in the way other processes were

previously controlled. In fact at this stage a person cannot even imagine how such freedom can ever come about. And so for a long time a deep sense of helplessness and despair is felt about the future and about the management of the person's own sexuality.

However I believe that slowly and painfully with a mixture of what may be thought of as success and failure – although in celibate friendship these concepts have to be fundamentally redefined – physical desire can gradually lose some of its stridency. Sexual responses and behaviour become more the subject of choice. This can only happen if efforts are made to cultivate the emotional and intellectual dimensions of the relationship. It will not happen if, whenever strong desire is experienced in a relationship, the relationship with that particular person is given up.

In a long-term and loving friendship where there is some degree of physical intimacy without full sexual intercourse, friends can teach one another about their physical loveliness. Friends can also learn the language of the body so that in their ministry they can be less inhibited and therefore communicate with others in a more natural, loving, self-giving yet celibate way. So these two elements which are brought about and endure in a consummated relationship, can be brought about and endure in a celibate friendship too.

The challenge in celibate friendship is for each partner to accept the whole truth – the full reality of who she or he is – i.e. that she or he is both celibate and sexual. This acceptance of the whole truth of the adult sexual celibate body does not come about easily. It may be a long time before a person stops regarding the body as a threatening enemy who may suddenly betray him or her, and instead learns to smile benignly on its biological responses. I believe that this struggle to achieve a personal civilization can be conducted within a celibate friendship where there is mutual understanding and acceptance. Yet an even greater part of that struggle must be conducted when one is alone with one's conscience or in conversation with God.

Sometimes it takes years of painful struggle between a person's sexuality and celibacy before the two can be integrated. I believe that this integration is helped by the attitude of a friend. If a friend struggles to accept the whole truth of who that person is – that she or he is both sexual and celibate – then I believe that the celibate person is helped to integrate these two seemingly contradictory aspects into his or her life.

Suggested criteria in sexual morality

Physical communication, whether small gestures or full sexual intercourse, is never only a surface physical statement. It is – or can be – a

depth experience too. If we are touched in a caring way, we are touched not just on the surface, but in the depths of our being as well. I think that it is tragic, if – in responding to, or assessing the meaning of gestures which we give to and receive from others – we concentrate only on the physical responses they arouse. We can miss the real meaning of a gesture if we interpret it too narrowly – in terms only of involuntary bodily response. We must not rely only on biological and intellectual criteria, to judge the meaning, the truthfulness or the morality of physical communication. To establish whether a physical gesture is a truthful and authentic statement of who a person is, we must submit all gestures to the criteria, not only of the head but of the heart as well. The heart – which is the seat of the emotions – has its own wisdom, its own language. And if there is a conflict between the two, perhaps we must in the long run learn to listen to the heart. If we have the courage to do so, we may move beyond the letter of the law, to the spirit of the law – and in doing so find that ‘new heart’ which has been promised to us by Christ.

I believe that each of us has the inherent capacity to interpret the real meaning of a gesture no matter how confusing the context within which it is made. We see a beautiful example of this heart criteria in operation in Jesus as he publicly accepted Mary’s sensuous and loving anointing of his feet. Though sexual intercourse may be the most intense form of touch it is not the only form of touch which can transform, liberate and redeem us. Any caring touch can heal us and open us up more fully to God and to others.

In childhood we learn the rudiments of the language of touch. In adulthood we must continually build upon what we have learned. A consummated sexual relationship is one obvious place where a person can learn the subtleties and nuances of the language of touch. But the basic grammar of that language can be learned in celibate friendship too. Through a stumbling process of trial and error, celibate people can gradually learn to distinguish between different kinds of touch. They can learn that while loving touch is always affectionate it is not always sexual. They can learn that loving sexual touch is not always invitational; and that sexual touch which is invitational is not coercive because it does not rob another of the freedom to decline.

It is particularly important when discussing celibate friendship to remember that loving sexual touch is not necessarily an invitation to sexual intercourse. It may simply be a very honest and truthful statement to another person of who one really is. And most people – including celibate people – need to make that statement of who they really are, at some time in their adult lives to someone who can listen, accept and understand.

Such a statement may be made through the medium of gestures – for example in an embrace. And if listened to carefully with one’s heart, it might sound something like this. ‘I am a man (woman). Although I am celibate I still have all the longings of a man (woman). I cannot hide (deny) this truth from you or myself any more. Can you accept me as I really am?’

Such a statement can be truthful because it acknowledges the reality of human/sexual longing without demanding or forcing a response. If such a statement can be heard and accepted by another person for what it really is – as a confession rather than as an invitation – then I believe that a celibate person can begin to own his or her own body, his or her own sexuality, his or her own humanity in a new, more accepting, less driven way. And so gradually, in the safety of an intimate loving and accepting friendship the celibate is enabled to reclaim his or her own sexuality – the sexual celibate is enabled to ‘come out’.

There is no doubt that in celibate friendship there are lonely moments and painful moments. But there are joyful moments too – moments when another reality is fleetingly glimpsed. In the life of the vowed celibate such joyful moments

. . . are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.²

NOTES

¹ Galway Kinnell, *The rattle bag* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).

² T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages* V, *The Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944).