



ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

OFFICE OF THE RECTOR

10701 South Military Trail ~ Boynton Beach, Florida 33436-4899

Tel: 561.732.4424 ~ Fax: 561.737.2205

RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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“Chaste Celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom”

As a newly ordained priest I can remember running many wedding rehearsals. I would be standing next to a beautiful young woman who had been chosen by the bride and groom to be the lector as she would say “It is not good for man to be alone” and “Thus a man leaves father and mother and clings to his wife” (Gen 2:18, 24). Or at the ceremony itself I would be proclaiming those same words as echoed by our Lord in the 19th Chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel (v.5). At 27 years old, I was self-conscious and even felt foolish or embarrassed at times, not because of how I felt about celibacy, but because of its vast misunderstanding by so many in the pews in front of me. Then one day it dawned on me that in that same chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Our Lord also presents the vision of one who has been called “to freely renounce sex for the sake of the Kingdom” (Mt. 19:12). I had such peace in my own heart as I began to truly see the complementarity as intended by Christ these 2 great vocations. In fact, one of the greatest gifts of my priesthood has been to see and appreciate the married vocation through couples I have grown close to these past 16 years. Just like Mt. 19, we complement each other, and we are a gift to one another.

Thus I want to emphasize the dignity of marriage and the marital act that we might more fully appreciate what we have “freely renounced for the sake of the Kingdom.” As the Preacher of the Papal Household for our last 2 great Popes, Blessed John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM, Cap., wrote “If marriage were something negative, renouncing it would be not a free choice but a duty” (*The Charism of Priestly Celibacy*, 8). [the book I gave you at Christmas] He further reflected, “There has been much discussion in the past about whether or not virginity and celibacy are a more perfect state than marriage and, if so, in what sense. I believe that celibacy is not *ontologically more perfect*: each of the two states of life is perfect for the person who is called to it. It is however a state in life that is *eschatologically more advanced*, in the sense that it more clearly approximates the definitive state toward which we are all journeying. St. Cyprian, a married man, wrote to the first Christian virgins, ‘What we shall be already you have begun to be’ ” (*Charism*, 10). Even the great St. Augustine emphasized to celibates “that they may not consider marriage an evil” (*Charism*, 56). Thus for us to value our calling, we must value and see the deep richness of the vocation to marriage and the marital act. We must be healed of wounds from our own upbringing of broken homes, flawed personalities, dysfunctional relationships, and even for some of you the wounds of sexual promiscuity, in order for us to know the beauty of the vocation we support as spiritual fathers to the families entrusted to us.

So now back to our highly misunderstood gift, celibacy. It is important for each of us called to celibacy, or discerning the call, to value its meaning. We must know how to defend it and live it joyfully in the midst of a very secularized world. First of all, how do we simply explain it? I

always begin with the words of our Lord in Mt. 19 and then back it up with St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians Chapter 7:32-34, "The unmarried man who is able to give himself whole heartedly/single heartedly to the Lord." Many are surprised by the scriptural basis for celibacy (especially if they are not Catholic). Then we explain that Christ Himself – who we are called to represent as priests – chose a celibate lifestyle for his earthly ministry. An emphasis that Archbishop Vigneron highlights as he reflects on the writings of Pope Benedict: "Jesus was a virgin, his virginity was integral to his priesthood, and his being a virgin-priest is the ultimate reason for priestly celibacy" (*Charism*, 104). We call this the Christological basis for celibacy. As the priest has been configured to Christ through ordination, he now shares in a more profound way a love for the Bride of Christ; he thus enters into a nuptial relationship with the Church. "Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the Church. He gave himself up for her [...]" (Eph. 5:25). What is Christ's is his own, therefore the priest must lay down his life for the Church and understand that he has entered into a relationship, like marriage, that is for the whole of life. "The priest is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, the Spouse of the Church" (*PDV* 22). Pope John Paul II had a particular affinity for this image of the "priest as bridegroom." "Therefore, the priest's life ought to radiate this spousal character which demands that he be a witness to Christ's spousal love, and thus be capable of loving people with a heart which is new, generous and pure, with genuine self-detachment, with full, constant and faithful dedication [...]" (*PDV* 22). "The Church as the Spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her Head and Spouse loved her. Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self *in* and *with* Christ *to* his Church and expresses the priest's service to the Church and in the world" (*PDV* 29).

A seminarian who does not have a deep desire to get married and have children needs to rethink his vocation, for these are natural and healthy manly desires of the heart. He needs to recognize that in actuality, the priest truly *is* a married man and a father. The natural analogy of marriage used for the priest and the Church is in no way fictitious, but in truth is the "really real." For in point of fact, the sacrament of Matrimony is the foreshadowing of the marriage of Christ and the Church (cf. Eph. 5) which the priest *in persona Christi* enters into. As is the case with faith, the supernatural is more real than the natural: Baptism is more of a true birth, the Eucharist is the most nourishing food, Reconciliation is the deepest forgiveness, Anointing of the Sick is the most core healing, etc. So the supernatural marriage of the priest to the Church is the real prefigurement of the heavenly kingdom where "we will neither be married nor given in marriage." This is the previously alluded to Eschatological meaning of celibacy; the chaste-spousal love in which every soul will find its fulfillment in heaven. This kind of chaste-spousality that the priest enters into is not un-natural, as many say today, but it is super-natural – a call by God to belong totally to Him, body and soul in this life in anticipation of the life to come. Our life is a foreshadowing – an image of Christ's love for the Church which finds its ultimate meaning in heaven.

Thus, the Ecclesial and Pastoral meanings flow from the deeper theological realms. The fruit of living in this manner is our radical availability to serve the people of God – it gives great meaning to our title "Father" and helps us to realize our masculine calling to espouse the Church and lay down our lives for our Bride. Pope Paul VI wrote: "The free choice of sacred celibacy has always been considered by the Church as a symbol of, and stimulus to, charity. It signifies a love without reservations; it stimulates to a charity which is open to all" (*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 24 [24 June 24 1967]). Pope Paul VI spells out each of these different dimensions beautifully and clearly in *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* which I encourage each of you to read.

These same four reasons: Christological, Ecclesiological, Eschatological, and Pastoral are beautifully summarized by our former Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in *Sacramentum Caritatis*:

“The Synod Fathers wished to emphasize that the ministerial priesthood, through ordination, calls for complete configuration to Christ... This choice on the part of the priest expresses in a special way the dedication which conforms him to Christ and his exclusive offering of himself for the Kingdom of God. The fact that Christ himself, the eternal priest, lived his mission even to the sacrifice of the Cross in the state of virginity constitutes the sure point of reference for understanding the meaning of the tradition of the Latin Church. It is not sufficient to understand priestly celibacy in purely functional terms. Celibacy is really a special way of conforming oneself to Christ’s own way of life. This choice has first and foremost a nuptial meaning; it is a profound identification with the heart of Christ the Bridegroom who gives his life for his Bride. In continuity with the great ecclesial tradition, with the Second Vatican Council and with my predecessors in the papacy, I reaffirm the beauty and the importance of a priestly life lived in celibacy as a sign expressing total and exclusive devotion to Christ, to the Church and to the Kingdom of God, and I therefore confirm that it remains obligatory in the Latin tradition. Priestly celibacy lived with maturity, joy and dedication is an immense blessing for the Church and for society itself” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 24 [22 February 2007]).

Thus, celibacy is both reasonable and appropriate. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council remind us that, “celibacy is in very many ways appropriate to the priesthood. For the whole mission of a priest is a dedication to the new humanity” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16).

Early on in our vocational discernment we very often have a negative view of celibacy as a life of negation. There is great fear and trepidation regarding the thought of life-long celibacy. We focus on what we are giving up with no true realization of what we are to gain. I go back to Mt. 19: 27 in which Peter says: “We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?” Our Lord assures the disciples: “everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life” (vs. 29). Jesus reminds us that we are going to get so much back in the here and now! I promise you that I have received a hundred times more than anything I have given to the Lord.

We are called to a freedom *for* greater loving, not a freedom *from* a life of intimacy. As a first theologian studying in a language program, my classmate and I were surrounded by a group of attractive young European women who could not comprehend the decisions we were making to become celibate priests. The wise old pastor with whom we shared this quandary told us to simply say: “*Ho fatto una scelta di amore*” – “I have made a decision/a choice to love.” The simple line of this octogenarian has brought me great peace through the years. Indeed, we freely are making a choice – a choice to love. Rather than seeing my calling as simply a privation, as I have matured, I grow more and more to see it as a gift *of* love *to* love *from* Love Himself.

This does not mean that we will be without struggles or ups and downs, but if we understand celibacy as a charism or gift we live it in relationship to the Giver. It is also important to remember that God doesn’t ask us to do that which He doesn’t give us the grace to do. For 2000 years He has called men and women to this lifestyle – a mode of living that is foreign to our highly secular and sexually charged media driven world, but that doesn’t mean that it can’t be lived today. It is not, as they say, un-natural. It is super-natural – all grace! Lest I overly

spiritualize this reflection tonight I want to also emphasize that this gift must be received and worked on until the day we die (ask any elderly priest). The virtues of self-mastery and self-discipline are essential for any healthy man – married or celibate. In fact, it would be completely irresponsible to think that self-denial would not have to be an integral part of any Christian vocation. We began Lent with the Gospel reminding us: “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross” (Lk. 22:24 – Thursday after Ash Wednesday).

So our training in chaste-celibacy must involve our whole being: our thoughts, words, and actions. In other words, am I living a life in conformity with the 6th Commandment? Let’s reflect on these three areas of our life in order to help us live our calling to the full.

1) Custody of the eyes: Our eyes are the gateway to our souls and what we let in affects us deeply, whether that be the second or third glance at a beautiful woman (one is actually enough to thank God for her beauty), or the movies we watch, or images from the computer we take in – all are detrimental to our spiritual health and by God’s grace we need to “deny ourselves, take up our Cross and follow Him.” Please be aware of the gravity of the sin of pornography, its detrimental nature for your interpersonal life, and the public forum that all online activity is, and thus the possibility of being a source of scandal. Remember we don’t have to touch somebody else to do damage or sin. Jesus tells us that “if you have lusted in your heart you have already sinned” (Mt.5:28). Beware of leading a fantasy life in your mind or allowing yourself to indulge the sexual thoughts that might pop into your mind. Once again regarding the internet, this is a warning regarding hitting up against the firewall – I do not want to make of this an issue for any of you, so please let it stop now. Get a hold of this issue that you can be free. That is the real point, freedom. Be accountable to a good friend, be humble enough to know your weakness to have blocks on your laptop, ipad, smart phone – *every* man should have these safety nets to protect him; thus model this for the men you will one day help in the confessional. Like Msgr. Muhr spoke of last week, there is an intimate connection between the Confessional and the Eucharist. Please strive to never receive Our Lord unworthily. If you have had a personal fall, pick yourself up immediately and make a good confession – that is what Our Lord wants for you, while the evil one would rather see you beat yourself up and leave you in the isolation of your sin. There is a song we used to sing at my first parish at the teen Mass: “We fall down, we get up. And the difference between the saints and the sinners, is that the saints are the sinners who fall down but get up.”

2) Speech: “Say only the things men need to hear” (Eph. 4:29) and regarding immorality “these things should not even be mentioned among you ... Nor should there be any obscene, silly, or suggestive talk; all of that is out of place” (Eph. 5:3-4). Base conversations which denigrate sexuality have no place among us. So called “locker room talk” is maybe something you did at 17, but it has no place in our vocations as priests and seminarians striving to model our lives after Christ the Virgin. Be proud of who we are, but without being prideful. Do not be ashamed of being a “virgin for Christ” either by virtue or by conversion – both are a grace. There is a wonderful line in the 1980’s movie entitled *Moonstruck*, when actress Olympia Dukakis, who is in an unloving marriage, is being tempted by a seemingly compassionate gentlemen. As he leans in to kiss her after a meal she pulls back from him. As he asks “why not?”, she quickly responds: “Because I know who I am!” We need to know who we are and conform our lives to the reality of our vocations

3) Deeds: We are to be models of Christian gentlemen and virtue. Thus in our dealings with both men and women we keep healthy and proper boundaries which respect both them and our own calling. Priesthood is lived in deep intimacy with others, but that intimacy could lead to disintegration if not centered in Christ. The words of St. Paul to Timothy serve as a healthy reminder “Treat older women as you would your mother and younger women as you would your sisters, with absolute purity” (1 Tim. 5:2). A good rule of thumb: if you are feeling a little uncomfortable with your boundaries with someone and you have to ask “should I be doing this?” you probably shouldn’t. Have good priests and lay friends to bounce things off of – you’ll be amazed at how wise the people of God are.

God forbid that any of us ever be a source of scandal for the church – sexual sins and crimes have been the plague of our age and we are to be part of the solution and not add to the problem. I heard a shocking statistic just last week by a very knowledgeable Jesuit psychologist who works with priest-abusers: “30-35% of those ordained five years or less are getting into serious psychological, sexual, or emotional issues: pregnancies, lashing out in anger at parishioners, autistic disorders, lack of empathy, etc.” (cf. Fr. Jerry McGlone, SJ). So please do not think that we talk about these things too much, or that the problems that the Church has experienced is only by priests ordained in 1970; and that these issues would never happen to you – work hard to grow in virtue and grace that you may be who you desire to be for the people of God. If you cannot live a chaste-celibate lifestyle, especially in your dealings with others, then as they say, “that is a positive sign of a negative vocation”. Save yourself from a life of personal misery and of heartache for the faithful, and with your spiritual director, formation advisor and vocation director discern your way out of seminary formation.

Brothers, none of us is perfect or lives this life with perfection, but the margin of error in a post 2002 Church is very small. If you feel that you have begun to cross a line in a relationship – bring it to spiritual direction, be accountable with a friend, and make a good confession. Do likewise with any other sins against the sixth commandment we have already mentioned. By frequent recourse to Spiritual Direction, Confession, and friendship based on a healthy intimacy in the Lord you will be a happy, healthy, holy and balanced celibate man.

Celibacy lived without Christ at the center disintegrates into a self-centered, idiosyncratic, bachelorhood. Whereas, the celibate who lives a life of prayerful intimacy with Christ, selfless service to his Bride, the Church, and sacrificial love for his children is an inspirational hero that will inspire faith in the hearts of many. Grace builds on nature, and if God has called you to the supernatural vocation of the priesthood, He will give you the grace to strengthen and purify you to live chaste-celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. Be grateful for this gift, because where there is gratitude, the vices of bitterness, resentment, and un-chastity have no room to grow – they are deadly for us and stifle our integrated and joyful calling to discipleship.

To an unbelieving world, we are fools and called “father-what-a-waste” but to us who believe in the fruitful virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we can see with the eyes of faith that like Mary, St. Joseph, and even Our Lord, our chaste-celibate commitment is life-giving and fruitful to those entrusted to our pastoral care.

Let us close with the recitation of the *Angelus*