



# ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

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## RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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### “Sacred Celibacy”

#### Part 2

Today we continue with the theme of sacred celibacy as enunciated by Blessed Paul VI in [\*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus\*](#). We have already discussed the Christological, Ecclesiological and Eschatological dimensions of celibacy and so now let us look at the final two dimensions: the call to deeper spiritual intimacy and a more radical availability to the holy people of God.

Chaste celibacy has the capacity, if we allow it to do so, to lead us to a deeper spiritual intimacy. First, as celibate men, we each have more time to foster periods of intimacy, solitude, and recollected hearts. Spiritual intimacy comes from the fact that celibacy is a gift of the Lord Himself. What kind of gift? To be able to love, as God Himself loves, those whom He loves, with the same quality of love. Thus, celibacy itself invites us to enter deeper into the relationship with God who is Love, allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our way of loving, in order to learn more and more how to love as God loves. Thus, it involves a dying of oneself as to be able to become “a man for others”, as Jesus Himself is. “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mt. 16:24).

We have discovered that times of vacation and visiting family are challenging to find time to pray the Office, our holy hour, etc. We have a very privileged lifestyle filled with private moments for the Lord that we should treasure rather than flee. If we are to fully embrace our celibate calling, then we must fully embrace an intense spiritual life living in “close relationship with Christ” (#75). I am so edified by so many of you who offer a daily holy hour in addition to daily Mass and the Divine Office as the spiritual staples of our day. These are our safeguards in the battle which is real though often unseen. Pope Paul wrote of “spiritual warfare” (#73) in which we are exposed to the elements of the world and must wage war against the temptations that will come our way by simply being men in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Temptations against chastity are all around us, and we must be vigilant in the fight, and transparent with our confessors and spiritual directors. I am grateful for the support you offer each other especially with groups like Friends of St. Joseph and your Emmaus Groups. In addition, accountability on the internet with programs like [Covenant Eyes](#) and “[Fight the New Drug](#)” are to be highly encouraged as ways of living in greater freedom and transparency. The seminary is happy to pay for Covenant Eyes monthly service if you would like to participate, simply email John Galvez and ask to have your name added to the list and he will help you set it up. Lest you worry about it being held against you, both the rector and the vice rector are on the list, so you are in good company! Be attentive to moments when we are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and Tired (HALT). We eventually learn to recognize our triggers and the frustrations (most of the time) that pull us out of the joy of our vocation. Pornography and masturbation offer the illusion of relief and release from frustrations or loneliness, but by turning away from the Lord (and our true selves) in such moments, we are left unsatisfied and empty. The

evil one so wants to rob us of joy as we are led down the path of infidelity either with ourselves or others. It is always in deeper relationship and intimacy with Beauty, with Christ, with His holy people that we discover the greater significance of sacred celibacy. Let's also not forget that this is about our souls: "Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, *for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified*" (1 Cor. 9:25-27). Sometimes we need to be shaken out of our malaise, habitual behaviors, and sinful addictions by the reminder of Eternity! Let us not be lethargic when it comes to our souls – fight for it, fight for purity, and never give up or despair!

Finally, the fifth reason is pastoral. Of our whole-hearted service to the people of God Pope Paul VI wrote: "The consecration to Christ under an additional and lofty title like celibacy evidently gives to the priest, even in the practical field, the maximum efficiency and the best disposition of mind, mentally and emotionally [psychologically and affectively], for the continuous exercise of a perfect charity. This charity will permit him to spend himself wholly for the welfare of all, in a fuller and more concrete way. It also obviously guarantees him a greater freedom and flexibility in the pastoral ministry, in his active and living presence in the world, to which Christ has sent him so that he may pay fully to all the children of God the debt due to them" (#32). St. Paul himself undergirds this reality which was lived in his own life: "An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided" (1 Cor. 7:32-34). To have an undivided heart for Lord's ministry is a beautiful and an amazing challenge. Being *or feeling* overwhelmed is a major obstacle and it happens if we think of everything we do as "work." Another obstacle to wholesome celibacy is that of a bachelor mentality of selfish living. The divided heart of the bachelor is due to his many "things" and can lead to a subtle rejection of the depth of celibacy's life-giving and relational nature. Do not let "work" or "things" get in the way of the Person of Christ and the life we are called to live. The Church always refers to the "life and ministry" of priests, not his work! It is intended to set us free from worldly anxieties and concerns so that we can freely live *for* and *with* the Lord in pastoral charity. Again, this is sometimes seen as the only reason – the practical. It is not unimportant, but it only makes sense in the light of all of the other more profound dimensions.

It is understandable that we can fall into the fear of future unknowns. However, Pope Paul wanted to remind us that our Lord started with only twelve and these "handful of men to all appearances [were] lacking in number and quality. He bade this little flock not to lose heart, for, thanks to His constant assistance, through Him and with Him, they would overcome the world" (#47). Do not live in fear, because the Risen Lord is with us, living in our flesh. I can remember a time that I was being stifled by a fear of failure. My spiritual director asked to recall how many years the Lord had given me the grace to be faithful to that point, and was there any reason to believe that his grace would leave me now or in the future. If a seminarian is continually leading women along and dating throughout his seminary career, that man like any man who is cheating on his fiancée, will *not* be able to stand the test of time. But if you have been able to maintain your focus and not live a duplicitous life, then the Lord is seemingly giving you the grace, and you need to live in peace and not allow the evil one to rob you of the tranquility of your vocation. You may have an occasional lapse in judgement in your private thoughts and actions, go to confession, pick yourself up and start again – the Lord is with you, He is Emmanuel and he wants to see you not just survive but thrive in your commitment to purity and innocence of heart modeling our life on the virgin Christ.

The Church in Florida and Georgia was founded by a bunch of missionaries who up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were circuit riders going from one community to another, selflessly giving themselves to their spiritual family. A married clergy is not the simple answer to the number of priests, since the main line ecclesial communions which allow their ministers to marry also experiencing a dearth in leadership (#49). At the same time, we welcome and rejoice with those men who join us in the ministry who come in from previous ministerial backgrounds with wife and children. They are not “lesser priests” but truly our brothers whom we embrace.

Do not be afraid of your life’s vocational choice being unnatural as the world might believe, because “far from destroying or doing violence to [our] nature, [celibacy] elevates it and imparts to it supernatural powers and vigor. God, who has created and redeemed man, knows what He can ask of him and gives him everything necessary to be able to do what his Creator and Redeemer asks of him” (#51). If God wants you to be a priest He will give you the grace to live the life as a healthy and holy chaste celibate man. Far from being unnatural, it is supernatural – for we rely upon God’s grace which elevates our nature as we cooperate with His grace. Pope Paul VI reminds us to be realistic about the challenges we will face, but not to over exaggerate a negative worldview of celibacy: “A true knowledge of the real difficulties of celibacy is very useful, even necessary, for the priest, so that he may be fully aware of what his celibacy requires in order to be genuine and beneficial. But with equal fidelity to the truth, these difficulties must not be given greater value or weight than they actually have in the human or religious sphere, or be declared impossible of solution” (#52). Allow our personalities to develop within our calling and thus experience the fruitfulness of celibate loving which does not deny our natural desires but hones our genuine loving and pastoral charity to open our hearts to all. When a young man discerning a priestly vocation says to me that he wants to be a priest but he also feels a call to marriage and family, my first response is to affirm this deep human desire within him. “Great,” I say, “because priesthood is about being married and having a family. So your discernment is this: are you called to serve one family or the whole family of faith?”

The Pope invites each of us, as he did to the clergy and seminarians 50 years ago to the following: to have a “clear understanding” of celibacy, “careful self-control and a wise elevation of the mind to higher realities” (#56), necessary discipline (#66), take personal responsibility and initiative fostering what he would call the “virtue of sincerity” (#67), to live in freedom (#69), and to have a “demanding asceticism” (#70). Writing directly to seminarians he expounds on this point:

[C]andidates for the priesthood should be convinced that they cannot follow their difficult way without a special type of asceticism proper to themselves and more demanding than that which is required of the other faithful. It will be a demanding asceticism but not a suffocating one which consists in the deliberate and assiduous practice of those virtues which make a man a priest: self-denial in the highest degree—an essential condition if one would follow Christ; humility and obedience as expressions of internal truth and of an ordered liberty; prudence, justice, courage and temperance—virtues without which it is impossible for true and profound religious life to exist; a sense of responsibility, fidelity and loyalty in the acceptance of one’s obligations; a balance between contemplation and action; detachment and a spirit of poverty, which will give tone and vigor to evangelical freedom; chastity, the result of a persevering struggle, harmonized with all the other natural and supernatural virtues; a serene and secure contact with the world to whose service the young man will dedicate himself for Christ and for His kingdom.

In such a way the aspirant to the priesthood will acquire, with the help of a divine grace, a strong, mature and balanced personality, a combination of inherited and acquired qualities, harmony of all his powers in the light of the faith and in intimate union with Christ, whom he has chosen for himself and for the ministry of salvation to the world (#70).

Be wary of fears and lies that arise in your hearts telling you that you will be lonely as a priest. Certainly, there are times of momentary loneliness, but when we strive to live in communion with Christ we are truly never alone. Solitude is precisely the place in which we are healed of our desire to escape reality through the virtual world of phantasms either in our minds or on our smart phones, the internet, or in gaming. Blessed Paul writes: “He who has chosen to belong completely to Christ will find, above all, in intimacy with Him and in His grace, the power of spirit necessary to banish sadness and regret and to triumph over discouragement. He will not be lacking the protection of the Virgin Mother of Jesus nor the motherly solicitude of the Church, to whom he has given himself in service” (#59).

We each need to learn now how to relax: reading, drawing, golfing, exercising, walking on the beach, certainly friendships, etc. We were not created to be alone on the journey and so the Lord gives us many travelling companions to accompany us on the way. In order to be healthy and wholesome, we must foster true fraternal relationships with our brothers in the ministry (#79). The priest who is a loner is the priest who is going to get in trouble. One bishop reminded me that the priests who leave active ministry or get themselves in trouble are the ones who are not in communion with their brother priests. Fraternity begins now and lays a foundation for your healthy future. You know how much credence I give to my own *Jesus Caritas* group, and thus the habits you are forming now in your Emmaus groups so that one day do the same. In addition to the giftedness of our fellow priests and seminarians, so too our bishop is called to be a comforting presence and guide (#91-95). Blessed Paul writes beautifully of the bishops’ solicitude for his priests. In reality we may or may not have this experience to the degree that we want or need. Please be realistic about our bishops, both their strengths and shortcomings; they are fallible and wounded men, as are all of us, and they need our fraternal support as well. I was recently working with a priest who has been on a leave of absence and he mentioned to me how cold his bishop was with him on the phone as they discussed his coming back to active ministry. I then realized that the priest had not yet acknowledged his fault in the process of leaving in the first place nor had he apologized to the bishop for breaking his trust. I invited him to reflect on the hurt and betrayal that his bishop must be feeling at this time – these men are human! One conversation of regret and apology went a long way to restore the communion between these two men.

Blessed Paul VI reminds us to connect deeply with the faithful and to be in relationships with families who keep us grounded. I have been blessed to be a part of *Teams of Our Lady* for the past 18 years as well as having a number of wonderful families from previous assignments and from childhood with whom I remain in close contact. Pope Paul encourages the laity that “by their devoted and warm friendship they can be of great assistance to the Church’s ministers since it is the laity, occupied with temporal affairs while at the same time aiming at a more generous and perfect conformity to their baptismal vocation, who are in a position, in many cases, to enlighten and encourage the priest. The integrity of his vocation, one that plunges him into the mystery of Christ and the Church, can suffer harm from various circumstances and from contamination by a destructive worldliness” (#97). [e.g. Natural analogy ... be realistic]. At this point it is also good to point out the extreme prudence and reverence with which we are called to live. It is very easy to inadvertently cross boundaries or engage in emotional infidelity if we at any time forget who we are as priests. We are called to treat adults with respect and an awareness of the sacred space we tread as priests. As St. Paul reminds the young Timothy: “Treat older women as though they are your mothers, and younger women as though they are your sisters, with complete purity” (1 Tim. 5:2) Let us learn to embrace ever more the virtues of modesty, purity of intention, and innocence of heart.

It is also the duty of the Church to protect her members from anyone who may not seem to be prepared to live sacred celibacy in purity and innocence of heart. Blessed Paul uses the strongest of words here: “Those who are discovered to be unfit for physical, psychological or moral reasons should be quickly removed from the path to the priesthood. Let educators appreciate that this is one of their very grave duties” (#64). The formation team and the spiritual directors take very seriously our duty to help you cultivate chaste celibacy, but if you prove to be living contrary to the goal of “sacred celibacy” either by word or action, I am bound by “grave duty” to dismiss you from the program of priestly formation. But if you are striving to do the right thing, if are responding to formation, and if you evidence growth in manly and Christian virtue, do not live in fear. Please do not fall prey to the “us against them” mentality that some seminarians foster and even foment within the community. If you cannot see that we are all on the same team and that our job is only to do what is best for the church, then it is time to take that angst to spiritual direction and find the deeper meaning behind this wound. The more we show a lack of docility, the more we show positive signs of a negative vocation.

We must always strive to delve deeper if we are to experience the “beauty, importance, and intimate fittingness of holy virginity for the ministers of Christ and His Church” (#60). This gift is to be discerned before entering the seminary and it is the Church’s responsibility to help you after entering priestly formation discern if you indeed have been given the “gift of consecrated celibacy” (#62).

I want to close our talk tonight with the words affirming the Church’s intention for priest in the Latin Church to maintain the discipline of celibacy because they are powerful indeed: “Hence We consider that the present law of celibacy should today continue to be firmly linked to the ecclesiastical ministry. This law should support the minister in his exclusive, definitive and total choice of the unique and supreme love of Christ; it should uphold him in the entire dedication of himself to the public worship of God and to the service of the Church; it should distinguish his state of life both among the faithful and in the world at large” (#14).

May we who have been called to the priesthood, accept this teaching in our hearts and manifest it in our lives that we may bear abundant fruit for the good of Jesus Christ and his Bride, our bride, the Church.