

INTIMACY IN A CELIBATE LIFE

Rev. James F. Schwertley
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The title of this talk, "Intimacy in a Celibate Lifestyle," would have been unheard of on the program of any clergy gathering 25 or 30 years ago. For then we still lived in a repressed atmosphere concerning the things related to sexuality. Moral books in theology categorized types of sex sins. Sex was most often not discussed in the home during the formative years. The sin element of sexuality was stressed. "Occasions of sin," "morose delectation," "pollution," "marriage debt" were things often mentioned. Seminarians were enjoined to "keep the vesting case between you and the woman," (even though vesting cases were attached to walls). "Beware of particular friendships" was an injunction given to seminarians (as if there is any other kind). They were confronted when they gravitated too much to one individual. Horror stories about fallen priests were included in seminary retreats.

Now we've gone to the other extreme. The modern culture tells us that something major is missing if there is no sex in one's life. Permissiveness and promiscuity are condoned, even glamorized in media ads. Soap operas and songs wail a litany of preoccupation with sexual indulgence and multiple affairs. Many songs depict co-dependent relationships — the "can't live without you" theme, the depicting of broken relationships and infidelity. Romantic love is over-glamorized and guilt is rationalized. Things are out of balance and this presents a greater challenge to celibacy than was perhaps posed by the old repressive culture. But it is also an opportunity to be more affective, more fully alive, more in touch with people than in the old days. The TV show "Beauty and the Beast" is a popular depicting of the beauty and romance of celibate relationships. So the spiritual values of Christianity are not totally obscured in the culture.

Essentially the problem is one of loneliness as discussed by Dr. Eric Fromm in his book, the "Art of Loving." Fromm says that everyone has to deal with the problem of loneliness and separateness in life, and humans try to do this in four ways. The first coping mechanism for loneliness which we learn in infancy is what he calls "orgiastic pursuits." Essentially this is any pleasurable activity, any sense experience that produces pleasure. People with poor self-esteem tend to zero in on these things early in life, in the form of sexual indulgence in self, eating, and increasingly in modern times, drugs. The second coping mechanism for loneliness is belonging to groups. This would be family, peer groups, growth group, or some kind of group with commonality to it. Thirdly, people cope with aloneness by creative activity. That helps us forget the pain of separateness for a time. This could be hobbies, work, study, physical training, sports, music. Finally there is the coping mechanism of altruism, generous relationships with others.

A person needs a balance in life of these four — pleasures, group activity, creative things, and relationships — or there is disharmony. In addiction, pleasures dominate and the other ways of coping with loneliness are obscured. There needs to be an intimacy developed with all of creation, an attunement as experienced by Francis and written about by Matthew Fox and Henri Nouwen. Among the orgiastic states that can be addictive is sexual expression, which may coincide with personal dependency. If a person comes from a non-nurturing background where there is a lack of love, worth, belonging, freedom and fun, there is a greater susceptibility to addiction, a tendency to overemphasize the orgiastic route of dealing with emotional pain. A self-nurturing through sexual self-indulgence, exploitive relationships and co-dependency can result, indeed will result, if addiction takes place. Treatment centers now recognize the presence of multiple addictions that may afflict persons.

Recovery involves balancing out the ways of dealing with loneliness that are present in life. For a celibate, as with anyone, this involves a decision to eliminate whatever is producing shame or guilt through compulsive activity. Thomas Aquinas described celibacy as "an emptiness for God." It is a chance to focus the energies more fully on the development of altruistic relationships with many people, to turn the love energies outward to others. Those not burdened with family cares and responsibilities do have more freedom to do this. But there is also the corresponding tendency to turn the love energies inward into secret or clandestine activities. But certainly channeling love energies into the "service of Love" as called for by Pope John Paul II is a challenge to everyone, to communicate and relate more honestly and compassionately. In dealing with sexuality, there needs to be, as with any other potentially addictive substance or behavior, a commitment to eliminate

whatever the binge activity is, whether it is masturbation, multiple relationships, an affair, porno movies, voyeurism as it apparently was with Jimmy Swaggart. Any addict tends to get discouraged and think negatively about the addictive thing and the possibility of overcoming it. Particularly is this likely to be true of sexual activity. Since it can be conducted secretly and won't cause physical debilitation or death (unless the person gets AIDS), it is more pernicious and the relapse rate is perhaps the highest of all the dependencies. Some just give up and continue it unabated, as did a former alcoholism counselor I knew. He thought it would not affect his life much but it turned out that he began to be demoted to lesser positions in his job at the chemical dependency center. Sexual malevolence was affecting his view of himself and therefore came to influence his work. Often early childhood wounds are the root cause of compulsion of a sexual nature and need to be healed through therapy. Adult Children of Alcoholics groups are effective in these cases, and these days there is much in the way of group and individual therapy on these issues. If we don't deal with these things, we pay the price in self-esteem and eventually physical health through stress effects. Dry drunk behavior seems to stem from unresolved childhood issues that need to be confronted and healed. As an old alcoholic put it — "Life is a cafeteria line. Take what you want but remember at the end of the line you have to pay for it." The price is mood swings, vague shame, uneasiness, negative thinking, and a sense of drift.

Talking it out with a friend can be helpful. I have never personally known one priestly defection case in which this was done, except in the late stages when the point of no return had already been passed. The ideal is to have one person who knows everything about you who is a wise counselor or spiritual director and one person who is a peer who you know everything about and who knows everything about you. Mr. Jack Gregory of Guest House, said in a talk on healthy sexuality that when there is in a male-female relationship "privacy, proximity, frequency and sharing, imbalance results." Proximity might mean nearness, touches, meaningful eye contact, etc. Then the question "does the relationship help or hinder my relationship with the Lord?" can be posed to self and or talked about with a trusted friend. Discernment will result.

Intimacy involves dealing with the problem of loneliness here in this phase of our eternal life rather than having it deal with us. It is a commitment that moves us toward really living rather than just existing.

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