

What is Celibacy?

One time I went to a conference with Christians from all other denominations and I had gotten to know one guy well over the course of the conference. On the final day we had lunch together and he said to me, “Hey is it true that you are becoming a priest?” I answered in the affirmative and he asked again, “So that means you are going to be celibate for the rest of your life too?” Smiling, I answered ‘Yes’ again, and he finally said, “Wow. Respect man.”

A lot of protestant denominations see celibacy as an option, but it is not really promoted and nor does it have the same perceived value as it does in the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, celibacy is often misunderstood even in our Church, and it was probably the biggest obstacle for me in discerning the priesthood because I didn’t fully understand it and how it would apply to my life and give me life.

If we truly understood the significance of celibacy, we would see how MARRIAGE and CELIBACY complement one another and point in the same direction.

So what does the Church teach about celibacy?

In order to understand the Church’s teaching about celibacy, we have to understand her teaching about marriage. Sometimes when we talk about celibacy and marriage, people think that marriage is a second class group and inferior in value to celibacy. That is not the teaching of the Scriptures or of the Church.

St. Paul in Eph 5:32 calls marriage a “Great Mystery” and has high praise for marriage because it reminds us of our future destiny. The beginning of the bible began with a natural marriage between Adam and Eve and the last book of the bible ends with the marriage between Christ and his Church. This is God’s plan for marriage all along because it is through this marriage between Christ and the Church, Christ and us, that we are able to share in the life of the Trinity. Think of it this way: Jesus is sharing in the grand banquet of the Trinity in heaven and the only reason we are able to come is because we are Jesus’ ‘plus one!’

Marriage is like that traffic sign saying ‘Edmonton 300 km’. Just as a traffic sign points to its destination so too marriage points us toward our final destiny: the wedding feast of the Lamb. So what is the purpose of celibacy then?

In heaven where we hope to achieve the reality of nuptial union with God, a union where we make a complete gift of ourselves to the Father with Jesus in the Spirit at the wedding between Christ and the Church, we no longer need marriage because the once you receive the reality, you no longer need the sign: the soldier who holds a picture of his beloved wife no longer needs the picture when he is in her presence because he possesses the real person and no longer an image of the person.

Hence, Jesus responds to the Sadducees who wonder about marital status in heaven at the resurrection of the dead saying: "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are [they] given in marriage" (Mt 22:30).

Those "who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12) are those who have freely chosen to make themselves celibates here on earth as a foreshadowing of the reality in which we will all live like in heaven.

Both vocations are pathways to love; both require the complete gift of self. It is not as if marriage is a path to love and celibacy is not. No! In marriage one makes a complete gift of themselves BY GRACE to their spouse so that loving their spouse who is a gift from God, they love the Giver in the gift; in loving your spouse you love God in and through your spouse. Celibates, on the other hand, make a complete gift of themselves to God in love and BY GRACE and foreshadow that future reality where we, married and celibate, will all love God above all else because that is what we have been made for.

Married people, we need you, I need you, to love authentically in your vocation because you are a sign for me of the final marriage that we all are awaiting. And if I am living my celibacy authentically, it will be a reminder for you that all the longings we have in this world cannot be completely fulfilled in anything except God alone.