## Chastity, Yesterday and Today

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La Castidad, Liberación para el Reino

the example of Chost Phosel

Selecciones de Franciscanismo 52 (1989) 71-78

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Then we are dealing with the brotherly love which the friars should have for each other, we are greatly influenced by our cultural and religious formation, which still bears the marks of its origin in medieval Franciscanism and which makes it difficult for us to accept and incorporate into our lives more recent scientific findings about human love, sexuality and chastity.

If we re-read the Franciscan sources with this newer knowledge in mind, we shall be struck by the pessimistic view of human love we find in those sources. This pessimism, however, is not confined to our own Franciscan spirituality, for we share it with the spirituality which has been prevalent in the whole Church almost up to the time of the Second Vatican Council.

In the course of time, and especially in more recent years, the anthropological sciences and even Western society at large, have gained some useful insights into sexuality which, however, the Church and the religious Orders have been slow to integrate into their view of consecrated chastity. This reluctance demonstrates and at the same time increases the uneasiness with which the subject of consecrated chastity is approached in the religious life. It is essential, therefore, that modern spiritual theology should be more realistic by taking into account the findings of the

anthropology and psychology of sexuality. Fortunately, this has already been happening to some extent in recent years.

## Christ's Celibacy

While we must acknowledge and utilize modern scientific discoveries in the field of sexuality, the real basis for our Christian celibacy is the example of Christ Himself. If we read the Gospels with a pessimistic view of sexuality, the image of Christ which we build up is that of a celibate whose emotional life was scarcely human but was based instead on His asexual divine nature. However, if we read those same Gospels objectively, we shall discover that Christ's celibacy did not prevent Him from feeling and expressing His affections but rather the reverse. His relationship with His Father was full of a tenderness which He showed in calling Him by the loving, familial name of "Abba." In His relationship with humans, He was cordial, friendly and open, sympathizing with them in their troubles and anxieties. He formed firm friendships with some of them; for example, with Lazarus and his sisters; and He even wept at Lazarus's tomb.

Christ, then, lived His celibacy joyfully and did not act as if it automatically made Him superior to those who had opted for marriage. This was so because He knew that people can show their love for God both in celibacy and in the sacrament of marriage. All through the history of salvation, God expressed His love for His people in terms of married devotion; similarly, Christ used celibacy as a means of showing the transcendence of those human relationships which are focused directly on God.

Both celibacy and marriage, therefore, reflect God's loving nearness to humanity and either is capable of transforming people beyond their own limits. Nevertheless, when Christ took on human form, He had to choose one or the other state of life, and He chose celibacy.

Christ's celibacy, at least as it appears in the Gospels, was not primarily a question of sexual purity being demanded by the union of His human and divine natures. It would seem, instead, that, for Christ, bodily chastity derived its importance, not from any need to observe a religious code of legal purity, but because it was the inevitable consequence of concluding that family life was not the best state in which to serve the Kingdom of God.

The Gospels contain a series of "sayings" describing the familial tensions which those who have decided to follow Christ will have to experience. Some of these sayings are extremely harsh. They show that total and exclusive dedication to preaching the Kingdom demands giving up the right to start a family of one's own, and, even further, requires leaving the family group in which one has been born and reared. This is so because both kinds of family life are obstacles to building up the new human relationships which one is trying to establish within the Kingdom. This does not mean that everyone who believes in Christ has to leave family behind. It does imply, however, that those who desire to follow Him completely do have to make this sacrifice. Christ's family as it is depicted in the Gospels did not differ much from the general norm of the day. His mother and relatives were worried that His way of life was becoming too unusual, so they tried to make Him act more "reasonably" and to rejoin the family circle. Christ answered them with a surprising statement which ruled out family life for anyone who wished to follow Him wholeheartedly: "My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:19-21; Mk 3:21). By this, He meant that, since the usual bonds of family were not compatible with the new relationships demanded of His closest followers, they would have to cut themselves off from their families and leave them behind (Lk 14:26).

## Francis's Celibacy

One of the results of Francis's conversion was his withdrawal from "the world," including his own family (Test 3). This idea of going aside from the world was foremost in his mind when he was setting down the form of Gospel life for his group. One of the Gospel "sayings" which shaped his radical following of Christ as an itinerant preacher was the text we have just quoted above in which Christ spoke about the need to leave one's family in order to follow Him (RegNB I 4f; Lk 14:26).

In his writings, Francis scarcely ever uses the word "chastity," and even when he does, it is always in a legal context, which shows that he was not obsessed with the subject. But, due to historical circumstances and his intention to establish a celibate fraternity, he had to make chastity an essential element of the friars' relationships within and outside the fraternity.

Although it is quite likely that Francis was influenced by the sexual pessimism of the time, that was not the reason he chose celibacy. He made

his choice because he saw celibacy as a way to follow Christ since it enabled the friars to be unconditionally open to God and helped them to communicate His word more effectively especially when preaching penance, two advantages which they would not have enjoyed if they were married.

Francis understood celibacy in a very personal way. For him, it was not a question of a virtue confined exclusively to sex. Instead, he regarded celibacy as denoting, in the widest sense, that purity of heart which is praised in the Beatitudes and which refers not only to bodily chastity but also to the soul's total openness to God. Receiving God with "pure heart and chaste body" (2EpFid 14) means affirming that chastity is not an isolated virtue but is part of that striving for union with God which helps us to see earthly things in their true perspective, "to seek the things of heaven and... never cease to adore and behold the Lord God living and true with a pure heart and soul" (Adm 16:2). Chastity, then, is part of that vigilance which all the friars must maintain so that they may "overcome every obstacle and put aside every care and anxiety..., (and) strive as best they can to serve, love, honor, and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind, for this is what He desires above all things" (RegNB XXII:26).

For Francis, following the Christ of the Gospel in celibacy meant doing so within the ambit of the fraternity. Therefore, those who wished to join the fraternity had to leave family behind and devote their whole hearts to their relationships with their brothers and with all mankind. Francis's stormy breaking with his family was not caused by, nor did it involve, any hatred or resentment on his part: it simply showed vividly the new depths of affection which had been opened up for him by his life with his brothers in the fraternity.

When Francis spoke about the love which the friars were to have for each other, he did not mince his words. In both his Rules, he gave the example of a mother as the model which the friars were to imitate and even surpass (RegNB IX:11; RegB VI:8). He did not, of course, mean that the relationships between the friars were to be carbon copies of those between the members of a family household. After all, the fraternity is not a family in the usual sense of the term but rather a group of men who have been drawn together by the Holy Spirit to follow the Gospel life in the footsteps of Christ. That is why Francis called them "brothers according to the Spirit," spiritual brothers.

But saying that the bonds between the brothers are to be strong, spiritual ties does not mean that the relationships between the friars must be

cold and unemotional. The word "spiritual" can lose most of its strength if it is understood outside the whole framework of the life lived by the friars. Because they have renounced security of ownership and the consolations of marriage, the friars need the emotional support of their brothers. If the members of a group like the fraternity do not live in an atmosphere of affection which allows them to know that their brothers accept them and are solicitous about their welfare, they will not be able to mature emotionally and spiritually as individuals.

Francis and his brothers also showed affection and concern for those outside the narrow circle of the fraternity. For example, in the beginning, their relationships with St. Clare and her Sisters were spontaneous and friendly. However, these relationships began to lose their spontaneity according as the fraternity and the Poor Clares took shape as religious orders. As time went by, the easy, friendly association between the first friars and the nuns at San Damiano gradually became more formalized until, finally, in his second Rule (RegB IX:2), Francis imposed the canonical prohibition against visiting the convents of nuns.

The prevailing attitude was to see every woman as a threat to monastic chastity. Therefore, because Clare and her Sisters were still women despite the fact that they were consecrated to God, they were to be regarded as a possible source of danger to the friars' virtue. Accordingly, the brothers had to be very cautious in their dealings with the Poor Ladies. However, we do not know for sure whether or not the attitude towards the Poor Clares which Celano attributes to Francis (2Cel 207) reflects the reality of the situation or whether, on the contrary, Celano supplies it merely to give "good example."

As a group of celibates within the Church, the fraternity had to observe the prescriptions of canon law if they were not to be regarded as belonging to one of the heretical movements so popular at the time. That is the reason for the chapter in the Rule of 1221 (RegNB XII:1-6) in which appear all the errors that were usually attributed to those movements. In the beginning, however, the fraternity had normal social relationships with women, and it was only when the friars became organized as an order that they had to curtail these spontaneous associations. In fact, Francis kept up a close friendship, not only with Clare, who, after all, was a nun and his spiritual daughter, but also with secular women such as the famous Lady Jacoba. Yet his friendship with Jacoba did not prevent him from following the Gospel faithfully because she was not exclusively his personal friend, but

was a friend to the whole fraternity. So we find Francis on the one hand forbidding his brothers to associate with any women (perhaps because he was obliged to do so by canon law), while, on the other hand, he himself was maintaining warm friendships with several ladies.

## one has result topose modern Our Celibacy

In recent years, our celibacy has gone from being a "protected" virtue to being one for which we have had to take more personal responsibility. By its very nature, the fraternity, including the friary and the habit, used to protect us against possible attacks from the world outside, acting as a sort of filter so that only in exceptional cases were we called upon to act on our own initiative in defense of our chastity.

Today, however, in many places most of those protective barriers have disappeared, leaving us to live our celibate lives in the midst of an "open" society in which sex is regarded less and less as a taboo subject. It follows, then, that we must face up to present conditions and deal more specifically in our formation programs with the modern "sexual revolution." We should do this because today much more than before, we have to live our chastity as *individuals* and not merely as faceless members of a sheltered group if we are to persevere in following a way of life that is not normal in our society.

Our decision to join a fraternity changes our emotional relationship with our families. There is no question of making a clean break with them, as Christ and Francis apparently did with their families, but rather of changing the center of our emotional lives. We must continue to love our families dearly but in a different way. Too much emotional dependence on them and over-eagerness to continue taking an active part in the normal events of their lives will delay our full integration into the fraternity. And while the fraternity cannot be a substitute for our natural family, it should be the home in which our emotional life matures, a celibate emotional life which has its advantages and drawbacks but which, in last analysis, must be enough to satisfy our need to love and be loved.

In the past, fraternal charity, the emotional response between the brothers, was shaped by an imperfectly worked-out spirituality which tended to teach that fraternal relationships should ideally be cold and totally divested of warmth and true affection. This may have been what was expected of the traditional "manly and austere" Capuchin; but things have

changed, and today we can relate more warmly to each other without damaging our "image."

If we are to succeed in creating this climate of warmth and cordiality, we must first want to do so; and then we need to re-educate ourselves and acquire skills in this new dimension without making ourselves feel ridiculous. Fortunately, there are social techniques, group dynamics, which can revitalize and bring warmth to our fraternal relationships without sentimentalizing them.

Among our fraternal relationships there may be one or more that are special to us because they are closer and deeper than the others. Formerly, such relationships were known as "particular friendships" and were frowned upon. Yet such friendships are normal and can be advantageous to us if they help us to integrate ourselves more easily and more fully into the main body of the fraternity. But they must not be used as devices to isolate or insulate us from the other friars, thus hindering our own emotional growth and that of the group as a whole.

We can say the same about friendships with people outside the group. The fraternity cannot be all-pervading and all-providing. There are elements of life which we can obtain better—or perhaps only—by means of true friendships outside the fraternity, but always with the proviso that we do not transfer our emotional center of reference from the fraternity to those friendships. The common excuse that we must look outside for what we cannot get at home should not be used to dispense us from doing our part in contributing to and fostering the emotional growth of the fraternity.

Keeping up friendships with people outside the fraternity, especially with married people, will make us see more clearly what our option for celibacy entails. We did not choose celibacy because marriage lacks its own values, yet, because of our limited human condition, our decision means that we must forego many values which are not compatible with our chosen way of life. Wishing to experience *everything* could be an excuse for not committing ourselves to *anything*.

We must be thoroughly convinced that our fraternal relationships can help us to reach emotional maturity as surely as married couples' sexual and familial relationships do for them. Of course, we must also be aware that a married couple's life together fills for them an "emotional vacuum" which our celibacy can never fill for us.

If we are to live our fraternal life joyfully and without that self-pity which celibacy can produce in us, we must have recourse to all the means at our disposal, the principal of which is prayer. We have vowed to be celibate for the sake of the Kingdom of God; that is to say, our celibacy has its roots in religion, in God, and we shall fully understand, value and derive strength from those roots only if we draw ever closer to God and grow ever more open to Him. Furthermore, we must express this nearness and openness to God in a practical way by making His Kingdom visible on earth. Celibacy, then, is a sign that demonstrates in our weak flesh what God wishes to do for everyone, that is, to reconcile them to Himself and give them what St. Paul calls "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21).

All human relationships, including our own, are meant to help us to grow to full maturity. The study of spiritual theology, religious anthropology and psychology can help to deepen our knowledge of the celibacy we have chosen. In addition, there are many group techniques which can make our human relationships more dynamic, especially in the matter of communication.

Notwithstanding all that, we must be clear about the realities of our life in the modern world, for we carry our celibacy in earthen vessels that require constant vigilance lest they be shattered into a thousand pieces. Society today had made sex just another consumer item, portraying sexual indulgence as one of the necessities of life. If we remain passive in the face of the constant barrage of the media on this subject and if we are remiss in asserting our belief in the value of celibacy, we run the risk of weakening in our resolve to pursue the Gospel way we have chosen.

We should also keep a careful eye on our relationships with our family. Simply because we have not married, our relatives tend to think that we still belong to them as much as we did before we joined the fraternity. But our membership in the fraternity requires a radical change of relationship because it is only within the fraternity and in reference to the fraternity that we must mature as adults. If we continue to yearn for, or depend on, the warmth and support of our family circle, we shall prolong our childhood indefinitely, and we shall never really succeed in facing up to our responsibilities as adults. Choosing the fraternity as our way of life demands complete emotional independence so that we may first give ourselves wholeheartedly to our brothers and then be able to re-adjust our relationships with our family and friends so that these outside relationships will help and not hinder our new commitments.

It would be excessively cautious of us to regard all friendships with people outside the fraternity as dangerous: but we would be ingenuous if we thought that we need not be vigilant in this matter. By themselves, outside friendships, no matter how deep they may be, need not come into conflict with our fraternal relationships since the two are different in nature. But, in fact, it can easily happen that we gradually come to transfer our emotional center of reference from the fraternity to our friends, so that the fraternity plays no part in our emotional life and has become merely a kind of club towards most of whose members we feel no real affection or loyalty. Friendships which tend to cut us off from our brothers and which may even result in a feeling of disaffection for them as a group can be a danger to our celibacy. This is so because such friendships remove our celibacy from its proper surroundings, from the fraternity from which it should derive its main support. However, this should not cause us to live in a state of constant apprehension about any relationships with people outside the fraternity. There are many reasons why we should live our celibacy joyfully and zestfully while integrating into it our family affections and our friendships as elements that enrich our fraternal relationships within the order. But we should also be aware that if we are not careful, our loyalties and affections can become divided, and that would not promote our emotional maturity.

From what we have said, we can deduce some working principles:

- 1. Our celibacy is based on Christ, who chose to be celibate in order to surrender Himself more fully to His Father's love and to express His own love for us by means of the Kingdom. Therefore, we should be ever more aware of the grace of chastity which we have been given; and we should open our hearts in prayer to the God who is the reason for our choosing celibacy and who urges us to use in the service of others the freedom which this option gives us.
- 2. We have chosen celibacy because we believe that it is the best way for us to respond to Christ's invitation to follow Him. But we also recognize that there are other ways of following Him, including marriage, which has its own special graces as a sacrament. Hence we should live our chastity as being valuable in itself and without denigrating other ways of life.
- 3. The Lord has called us to live in the fraternity so that we may experience the joy of knowing that we are all brothers and cherish each other as such. We should live and express these fraternal relationships with genuine affection so that we may grow in mutual love and respect. Besides the marks of friendship which we show each other every day, we should

express our appreciation for our brothers in a special way on important occasions in their lives such as their feast-days, birthdays, jubilees, etc.

- 4. We were born, reared and educated in our family, and it was our family that made possible our vocation to live the Gospel, for which we owe it a deep debt of love and gratitude. But we must not let our natural family ties interfere with our decision to join the spiritual family of the fraternity, which must now be the center and reference point of our emotional growth as adults. We should continue to love the members of our family but in a new way, visiting them when it is opportune to do so, yet without compromising our emotional independence and our ability to devote ourselves to our brothers in the Spirit.
- 5. The same must be said about friendships outside the fraternity. Christ Himself had friends who were very dear to Him, and Francis, too, had close friends who helped him to be faithful to the Gospel life. We should, then, cultivate such outside friendships as a grace which the Lord gives us for our mutual enrichment and for our own growth in our chosen life as celibates united in the fraternity.
- 6. In order to be faithful to our celibacy, we must use all the means of support available. We should also be on our guard against self-deception and be alert to discern whatever favors our option. We must learn to counteract the superficial view of sex as a consumer object which pervades modern society, and we must be discerning in our use of the media—films, videos, television, newspapers, magazines, etc.—which are the usual vehicles for reiterating this view.
- 8. We must continually review, select and adopt the best means for preserving and promoting our values, including celibacy. And we should make this revision periodically, both as individuals as well as collectively, especially in the local chapters.

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