

THE OBJECTIVE SUPERIORITY OF THE CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE CHURCH'S MAGISTERIUM

All quotations taken from the Vatican website

FAMILARIS CONSORTIO, 16, Apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II

Virginity or celibacy, by liberating the human heart in a unique way, “so as to make it burn with greater love for God and all humanity,” bears witness that the Kingdom of God and His justice is that pearl of great price which is preferred to every other value no matter how great, and hence must be sought as the only definitive value. It is for this reason that the Church, throughout her history, has always defended the superiority of this charism to that of marriage, by reason of the wholly singular link which it has with the Kingdom of God.

In spite of having renounced physical fecundity, the celibate person becomes spiritually fruitful, the father and mother of many, cooperating in the realization of the family according to God's plan.

VITA CONSECRATA, 18; 32, Apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II

In the countenance of Jesus, the “image of the invisible God” (*Col* 1:15) and the reflection of the Father's glory (cf. *Heb* 1:3), we glimpse the depths of an eternal and infinite love which is at the very root of our being. Those who let themselves be seized by this love cannot help abandoning everything to follow him (cf. *Mk* 1:16-20; 2:14; 10:21, 28). Like Saint Paul, they consider all else as loss “because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ”, by comparison with which they do not hesitate to count all things as “refuse”, in order that they “may gain Christ” (*Phil* 3:8). They strive to become one with him, taking on his mind and his way of life. This leaving of everything and following the Lord (cf. *Lk* 18:28) is a worthy programme of life for all whom he calls, in every age. The evangelical counsels, by which Christ invites some people to share his experience as the chaste, poor and obedient One, call for and make manifest in those who accept them *an explicit desire to be totally conformed to him*. Living “in obedience, with nothing of one's own and in chastity,” consecrated persons profess that Jesus is the model in whom every virtue comes to perfection. His way of living in chastity, poverty and obedience appears as the most radical way of living the Gospel on this earth, a way which may be called *divine*, for it was embraced by him, God and man, as the expression of his relationship as the Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with

the Holy Spirit. This is why Christian tradition has always spoken of the objective superiority of the consecrated life. Nor can it be denied that the practice of the evangelical counsels is also a particularly profound and fruitful way of sharing in Christ's mission, in imitation of the example of Mary of Nazareth, the first disciple, who willingly put herself at the service of God's plan by the total gift of self. Every mission begins with the attitude expressed by Mary at the Annunciation: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). (Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 18)

32. Within this harmonious constellation of gifts, each of the fundamental states of life is entrusted with the task of expressing, in its own way, one or other aspect of the one mystery of Christ. While the lay life has a particular mission of ensuring that the Gospel message is proclaimed in the temporal sphere, in the sphere of ecclesial communion an indispensable ministry is carried out by those in Holy Orders, and in a special way by Bishops. The latter have the task of guiding the People of God by the teaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of sacred power in the service of ecclesial communion, which is an organic communion, hierarchically structured. As a way of showing forth the Church's holiness, it is to be recognized that the consecrated life, which mirrors Christ's own way of life, has an objective superiority. Precisely for this reason, it is an especially rich manifestation of Gospel values and a more complete expression of the Church's purpose, which is the sanctification of humanity. The consecrated life proclaims and in a certain way anticipates the future age, when the fullness of the Kingdom of heaven, already present in its first fruits and in mystery, will be achieved, and when the children of the resurrection will take neither wife nor husband, but will be like the angels of God (cf. Mt 22:30). The Church has always taught the pre-eminence of perfect chastity for the sake of the Kingdom, and rightly considers it the "door" of the whole consecrated life. She also shows great esteem for the vocation to marriage, which makes spouses "witnesses to and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church, who signify and share in the love with which Christ has loved his Bride and because of which he delivered himself up on her behalf" (Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 32).

OPTATAM TOTIUS, 10, Vat. II, decree on priestly training

10. Students who follow the venerable tradition of celibacy according to the holy and fixed laws of their own rite are to be educated to this state with great care. For renouncing thereby the companionship of marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt. 19:12), they embrace the Lord with an undivided love altogether befitting the new covenant, bear witness to the resurrection of the world to come (cf. Luke 20:36), and obtain a most suitable aid for the continual exercise of that perfect charity whereby they can become all things to all men in their priestly ministry. Let them deeply realize how gratefully that state ought to be received, not, indeed, only as commanded by ecclesiastical law, but as a precious gift of God for which they should humbly pray.

Through the inspiration and help of the grace of the Holy Spirit let them freely and generously hasten to respond to this gift.

Students ought rightly to acknowledge the duties and dignity of Christian matrimony, which is a sign of the love between Christ and the Church. Let them recognize, however, the surpassing excellence of virginity consecrated to Christ, so that with a maturely deliberate and generous choice they may consecrate themselves to the Lord by a complete gift of body and soul.

They are to be warned of the dangers that threaten their chastity especially in present-day society. Aided by suitable safeguards, both divine and human, let them learn to integrate their renunciation of marriage in such a way that they may suffer in their lives and work not only no harm from celibacy but rather acquire a deeper mastery of soul and body and a fuller maturity, and more perfectly receive the blessedness spoken of in the Gospel.

PRESBYTERORUM ORDINIS, 16, Vat. II, decree on the ministry and life of priests:

16. (Celibacy is to be embraced and esteemed as a gift). Perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, commended by Christ the Lord and through the course of time as well as in our own days freely accepted and observed in a praiseworthy manner by many of the faithful, is held by the Church to be of great value in a special manner for the priestly life. It is at the same time a sign and a stimulus for pastoral charity and a special source of spiritual fecundity in the world. Indeed, it is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, as is apparent from the practice of the early Church and from the traditions of the Eastern Churches. where, besides those who with all the bishops, by a gift of grace, choose to observe celibacy, there are also married priests of highest merit. This holy synod, while it commends ecclesiastical celibacy, in no way intends to alter that different discipline which legitimately flourishes in the Eastern Churches. It permanently exhorts all those who have received the priesthood and marriage to persevere in their holy vocation so that they may fully and generously continue to expend themselves for the sake of the flock commended to them.

Indeed, celibacy has a many-faceted suitability for the priesthood. For the whole priestly mission is dedicated to the service of a new humanity which Christ, the victor over death, has aroused through his Spirit in the world and which has its origin “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man but of God” (Jn 1:13). Through virginity, then, or celibacy observed for the Kingdom of Heaven, priests are consecrated to Christ by a new and exceptional reason. They adhere to him more easily with an undivided heart, they dedicate themselves more freely in him and through him to the service of God and men, and they more expeditiously minister to his Kingdom and the work of heavenly regeneration, and thus they are apt to accept, in a broad sense, paternity in Christ. In this way they profess themselves before men as willing to be dedicated to the office committed to them—namely, to commit themselves faithfully to one man and to show themselves as a chaste virgin for Christ and thus to evoke the mysterious marriage

established by Christ, and fully to be manifested in the future, in which the Church has Christ as her only Spouse. They give, moreover, a living sign of the world to come, by a faith and charity already made present, in which the children of the resurrection neither marry nor take wives.

For these reasons, based on the mystery of Christ and his mission, celibacy, which first was recommended to priests, later in the Latin Church was imposed upon all who were to be promoted to sacred orders. This legislation, pertaining to those who are destined for the priesthood, this holy synod again approves and confirms, fully trusting this gift of the Spirit so fitting for the priesthood of the New Testament, freely given by the Father, provided that those who participate in the priesthood of Christ through the sacrament of Orders-and also the whole Church-humbly and fervently pray for it. This sacred synod also exhorts all priests who, in following the example of Christ, freely receive sacred celibacy as a grace of God, that they magnanimously and wholeheartedly adhere to it, and that persevering faithfully in it, they may acknowledge this outstanding gift of the Father which is so openly praised and extolled by the Lord. Let them keep before their eyes the great mysteries signified by it and fulfilled in it. Insofar as perfect continence is thought by many men to be impossible in our times, to that extent priests should all the more humbly and steadfastly pray with the Church for that grace of fidelity, which is never denied those who seek it, and use all the supernatural and natural aids available. They should especially seek, lest they omit them, the ascetical norms which have been proved by the experience of the Church and which are scarcely less necessary in the contemporary world. This holy synod asks not only priests but all the faithful that they might receive this precious gift of priestly celibacy in their hearts and ask of God that he will always bestow this gift upon his Church.

LUMEN GENTIUM, chap. 5, par. 42, Vatican II, decree on the Church

Likewise, the holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the Gospel by Our Lord to His disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state. This is a precious gift of divine grace given by the Father to certain souls, whereby they may devote themselves to God alone the more easily, due to an undivided heart. This perfect continency, out of desire for the kingdom of heaven, has always been held in particular honor in the Church. The reason for this was and is that perfect continency for the love of God is an incentive to charity, and is certainly a particular source of spiritual fecundity in the world.

Matrimony and Celibacy

20. Matrimony, according to the will of God, continues the work of the first creation; and considered within the total plan of salvation, it even acquired a new meaning and a new value. Jesus, in fact, has restored its original dignity, has honored it and has raised it to the dignity of a sacrament and of a mysterious symbol of His own union with the Church. Thus, Christian couples walk together toward their heavenly fatherland in the exercise of mutual love, in the fulfillment of their particular obligations, and in striving for the sanctity proper to them. But Christ, “Mediator of a superior covenant,” has also opened a new way, in which the human creature adheres wholly and directly to the Lord, and is concerned only with Him and with His affairs; thus, he manifests in a clearer and more complete way the profoundly transforming reality of the New Testament.

Christ's Example

21. Christ, the only Son of the Father, by the power of the Incarnation itself was made Mediator between heaven and earth, between the Father and the human race. Wholly in accord with this mission, Christ remained throughout His whole life in the state of celibacy, which signified His total dedication to the service of God and men. This deep concern between celibacy and the priesthood of Christ is reflected in those whose fortune it is to share in the dignity and mission of the Mediator and eternal Priest; this sharing will be more perfect the freer the sacred minister is from the bonds of flesh and blood.

The Motive for Celibacy

22. Jesus, who selected the first ministers of salvation, wished them to be introduced to the understanding of the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,” but He also wished them to be coworkers with God under a very special title, and His ambassadors. He called them friends and brethren, for whom He consecrated Himself so that they might be consecrated in truth; He promised a more than abundant recompense to anyone who should leave home, family, wife and children for the sake of the kingdom of God. More than this, in words filled with mystery and hope, He also commended an even more perfect consecration to the kingdom of heaven by means of celibacy, as a special gift. The motive of this response to the divine call is the kingdom of heaven; similarly, this very kingdom, the Gospel and the name of Christ motivate those called by Jesus to undertake the work of the apostolate, freely accepting its burdens, that they may participate the more closely in His lot.

23. To them this is the mystery of the newness of Christ, of all that He is and stands for; it is the sum of the highest ideals of the Gospel and of the kingdom; it is a particular manifestation of grace, which springs from the Paschal mystery of the Savior. This is what makes the choice of celibacy desirable and worthwhile to those called by our Lord

Jesus. Thus they intend not only to participate in His priestly office, but also to share with Him His very condition of living.