

Celibacy Anticipates Heavenly Existence

Following is excerpted from Pope John Paul III's general audience March 10, 1982.

The questions of the call to an exclusive donation of self to God in virginity and in celibacy thrusts its roots deep in the Gospel soil of the theology of the body. To indicate the dimensions proper to it, one must bear in mind Christ's words about the "beginning" and also what He said about the resurrection of the body.



The observation: "When they rise from the dead they neither marry nor are given a marriage," indicates that there is a condition of life without marriage, in which man, male and female, finds at the same time the fullness of personal donation and of the intersubjective communion of persons, thanks to the glorification of his entire psychosomatic being in the eternal union with God.

When the call to continence "for the Kingdom of Heaven" finds an echo in the human soul, in the conditions of this temporal life, that is, in the conditions in which persons usually "marry and are given in marriage," it is not difficult to perceive there a particular sensitiveness of the human spirit, which already in the conditions of the present temporal life seems to anticipate what man will share in, in the future resurrection.

However, Christ did not speak of this problem, of this particular vocation, in the immediate context of his conversation with the Sadducees, when there was reference to the resurrection of the body. Instead He had already spoken of it previously in the context of His conversation with the Pharisees on marriage and on the grounds of indissolubility, as if it were a continuation of that conversation. His concluding words concern the so-called certificate of divorce permitted by Moses in some cases.

Christ says: "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except in the case of concubinage, and marries another, commits adultery."

Then the disciples who — as can be deduced from the context — were listening attentively to the conversation and particularly to the final words spoken by Jesus, said to Him: "If such is the case of a man with

his wife, it is not expedient to marry."

Christ gives the following reply: "Not all men can receive the precept, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it."

In regard to this conversation recorded by Matthew, one could ask the question: What did the disciples think when, after hearing Jesus' reply to the Pharisees, they remarked: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry?" Anyway, Christ considered it an opportune occasion to speak to them about voluntary continence: for the Kingdom of Heaven. In saying this, He does not directly take a position in regard to what the disciples said, nor does He remain in the line of their reasoning. Hence He does not reply: "it is expedient to marry" or "it is not expedient to marry."

The question of continence for the Kingdom of Heaven is not set in opposition to marriage, nor is it based on a negative judgment in regard to its importance. After all, Christ, speaking previously about the indissolubility of marriage, had referred to the "beginning," that is, to the mystery of creation, thereby indicating the first and fundamental source of its value. Consequently, to reply to the disciples' questions or, rather, to clarify the problem placed by them, Christ refers to another principle.

Those who in life choose continence "for the Kingdom of Heaven" do so, not because "it is inexpedient to marry" or because of a supposed negative value of marriage, but in view of the particular value connected with this choice and which must be discovered and welcomed personally as one's own vocation.

For that reason Christ says, "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." Immediately beforehand, however, He says: "Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given."

As can be seen, Christ in His reply to the disciples' problem, states clearly a rule for the understanding of His words. In the Church's doctrine there exists the conviction that these words do not express a command by which all are bound, but a counsel which concerns only some persons: those precisely who are able to receive it. And those able "to receive it" are those "to whom it has been given."

The words quoted clearly indicate the importance of the personal choice and also the importance of the particular grace, that is, of the gift which man receives to make such a choice. It may be said that the choice of continence for the Kingdom of Heaven is a charismatic orientation toward that eschatological state in which men "neither marry nor are given in marriage."

However, there is an essential difference between man's state in the resurrection of the body and the voluntary choice of continence for the Kingdom of Heaven in the earthly life and in the historical state of man fallen and redeemed.

The eschatological absence of marriage will be a "state," that is, the proper and fundamental mode of existence of human beings, men and women, in their glorified bodies. Continence for the Kingdom of Heaven, as the fruit of a charismatic choice, is an exception in respect to the other state, namely that state in which man "from the beginning" became and remains a participant during the course of his whole earthly existence.

It is very significant that Christ does not directly link His words on continence for the Kingdom of Heaven with His foretelling of the "other world" in which "they will neither marry nor be given in marriage." His words, however, are found — as we already said — in the prolongation of the conversation with the Pharisees in which Jesus referred "to the beginning," indicating the institution of marriage on the part of the Creator, and recalling its indissoluble character which, in God's plan, corresponds to the conjugal unity of man and woman.

The counsel and, therefore, the charismatic choice of continence for the Kingdom of Heaven are linked, in Christ's words, with the highest recognition of the "historical" order of human existence relative to the soul and body.

On the basis of the immediate context of the words on continence for the Kingdom of Heaven in man's earthly life, one must see in the vocation to such continence a kind of exception to what is rather a general rule of this life. Christ indicates this especially. That such an exception contains within itself the anticipation of the eschatological life without marriage and proper to the "other world" (that is, of the final stage of the "Kingdom of Heaven"), is not directly spoken of here by Christ.

It is a question, indeed, not of continence in the Kingdom of Heaven, but of continence "for the Kingdom of Heaven."

Insights In Liturgy

By Father Thomas P. Mull



"Let Us Pray..."

The Introductory Rite is concluded with the opening prayer. This prayer culminates the previous rites, gives pause for silent reflection, and summarizes the prayer of the people as we prepare to listen to the proclaimed Word of God. The prayer "expresses" the theme of the celebration and by the words of the priest a petition is addressed to God the Father through the mediation of Christ in the Holy Spirit. (General Instruction, #32)

Historically, this prayer came almost immediately after the greeting of the people. The entrance procession completed, the presider would greet the people, then call them to prayer ("Let us pray"). A period of silence would follow. This was time provided for the assembly to offer its prayers in silence. Finally, the presider would "gather together" (collecta) the prayers and offer them

to the Father through Jesus Christ.

This simple rite gave everyone a clear understanding of what was happening as the people celebrated together. There was a sense of oneness, as everyone came together to pray; a sense of equality, as the assembly prayed silently and their prayers were verbalized by their spokesperson; a sense of reverence, as a people solemnly humbled themselves before their God. The purpose was completed through the prayer and the assent of the people: "Amen."

This prayer, as well as all of the proper of the Mass, follow the same structured development: there is an address made to the Father (at times this is extended because of the celebration of a particular feast or event); there is a petition made (which is the center of the prayer itself); and then there is the conclusion which always joins the prayer together and offers it "through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The core of our opening prayer is meant to be general enough so as to include all the unspoken prayers of the assembly. In the sacramentary, Sundays and major feasts have alternate opening prayers to provide options for various community celebrations.

A word on silence: "silence should be observed at designated times as part of the celebration. Its character will depend on the time it occurs in the particular celebration. At the penitential rite and again the invitation to pray, each one should become recollected..." (General Instruction, #23). Done with dignity and sufficient time, the opening prayer becomes the experience of a people genuinely united in prayer. Separate needs are represented by separate individuals, these prayers are summarized by the presider and offered, in the name of the assembly, through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit.

In our present liturgy, we conclude the introductory rite and now begin the Liturgy of the Word. Our hearts and minds should now be reflective and prepared to experience the presence of our God.

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