STUDIES

IN
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

"Let me love more passionately"

Religious Celibacy in a Secular Age

MICHAEL C. McCARTHY, S.J.

43/2 • SUMMER 2011

THE SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

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the first word . . .

Unless my imagination is playing games with me, the wedding business seems to have gotten much more complicated in the last few years. My assertion comes from a most unscientific observation of recreation-room chatter. Scarcely a week passes, or so it seems, that someone won't be asking about arranging faculties, delegation, letters from the provincial's office, and even civil authorization. Since I've never done parish work or campus chaplaincy, my personal experience in these matters is limited, almost non-existent. But it seems that Jesuits who do this kind of ministry on a regular basis appear to find working out legal details more time consuming than it used to be. It makes sense. As Catholic culture becomes more tenuous, young people are often surprised to learn that they just can't rent a priest for an afternoon and have a nice, romantic wedding on the beach at sunset without getting all sorts of dispensations. They are doubly surprised, and perhaps hurt, to discover that Jesuits don't simply "do a wedding"; we administer a sacrament as representatives of the Church and its embodiment in a particular parish. And of course with some ex-priests and suspended priests willing to use their civil authority as ministers without ecclesiastical supervision, who could blame a bishop, pastor, or provincial for wanting to know who is conducting marriage ceremonies on his turf?

In contrast, one other element seems to have held constant over the years. Jesuits generally will grasp at any excuse possible to avoid attending the wedding reception. Put in an appearance, if you have to, say grace before the meal appears, and get out. No wonder so many of us feel this way. I remember the few receptions I've attended as experiences of extreme discomfort. After all, the wedding party gathers to celebrate a wedding. It consists of couples welcoming the bride and groom into their ranks as adults taking responsibility for starting a new family. The ritual involves dancing for hours. Single people somewhat beyond the age of dancing usually find themselves seated at the same table, with the amplified music too loud to permit conversation. Younger singles engage in harmless flirting, as is appropriate in these circumstances. At the other tables, women compare dresses and babies; men discuss investment opportunities, golf, and the fastest route back to the interstate. No matter which group we sit with, as celibate men we simply don't fit in. It's an alien world. Although few would have the bad manners to say so, even after a nip or two of festive champagne, a lot of people, even Catholics, simply find us celibates strange. Perhaps even weird. They don't quite know what to do with us.

Let's look at that strangeness for a moment. Do people regard us as less than men, and if we do in fact pick up occasional hints of disdain or pity for our lot in life, does the sentiment we perceive in others influence our own self-understanding as vowed religious? I remember squirming uncomfortably as I was watching Walt Kowalski, Clint Eastwood's character in *Gran Torino*, express contempt for a young priest by referring to him as "a virgin." In the eyes of this crusty, gun-toting ex-Marine, ex-auto worker, such a truncated man would have nothing to say to him about life. Do many people feel that way? Do some make assumptions about us? Could there be some truth in what they sense but rarely say? What does it mean to be a fully developed man anyway?

The sex-abuse trauma of the last several years has raised the discussion to a new level of urgency. The prolonged conversation has yielded few conclusions, but some undeniable benefits. We seem to have taken several large strides away from the initial simplistic conclusions that celibacy is responsible (as though married men aren't equally capable of abuse) or that homosexuality is the root of the problem (as though heterosexual men aren't also capable of abuse). We've looked at seminary formation and admissions criteria, as well as the social conditions of rectory and community life. We've publicly adopted "zero tolerance" policies, and then questioned their potential for serious injustice to the accused. One recent report, sponsored by the National Review Board of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and prepared by researchers at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, concluded that the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s led to a sense of confusion and a blurring of boundaries in all segments of the population, including priests and religious. It was almost immediately rejected by some as another of the Church's attempts to duck responsibility for the crimes that priests committed during that period. Take a look at the May 30 and June 6 issues of *America*. And so the discussion continues. At least we can agree that celibacy remains a baffling, complex topic that defies simple conclusions. The conversation has to continue.

And we can also agree that this discussion is long overdue. A few weeks ago I was reading Rembert Weakland's beautiful and forthright autobiography, *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church*. He is truly edifying in his refusal to blame others for the sad conclusion to the public phase of his many years of exemplary service to the Church. Two of his remarks struck me as particularly helpful in trying to understand the roots of the problem. In recalling his study of moral theology in Rome, he notes that when the class in moral theology reached the tract *De Sexto (Præcepto*)—On the sixth (commandment); they wouldn't even use the term *De Sexu* (On sexuality)—the professor "made us close our books and forbade us to take any notes, lest in rereading we have impure thoughts" (p. 67). My own moral course was probably not much better in that area. I do recall one of our classmates, the late Lou Padovano, who was a practicing gynecologist before he entered, giving us a slide presentation on reproductive anatomy, much like a high-school nurse in front of a hygiene class. I can't recall anything beyond that. Sexuality was a topic no one talked about, or even thought about.

A second point in Archbishop Weakland's book was equally illuminating. Somewhat later in the book, as he reflects on having to rethink several issues after Vatican II, he notes the rapidly developing theological understanding of sexuality as a gift from God rather than a threat to salvation. Although this shift had an immediate and positive impact on the spirituality of marriage, he regrets that it did not lead to greater reflection among religious on their vow of chastity. He writes, "It is one thing psychologically to give up something that has been regarded as bad, but quite another to give up something now seen as good" (108). This may be another way of expressing the idea that the spirit of the times may indeed have been a factor in the conduct of some priests during that period. Priests and religious were entering a new, shifting psychic landscape without a road map, or a clear idea of their destination, or the reason they were making the journey in the first place.

The conversation continues on many fronts. I'm sure many of us read the comments of Dr. Barry Gault, a psychiatrist, in the April 22 issue of *Commonweal*. The article, "Society Men: What I learned from the Jesuits," includes more about-faces than an R.O.T.C. drill team on parade, but it does eventually reach its objective. His unfortunate introductory anecdote is misleading, in that it sets a snide tone that compromises the serious point he wants to make. It involves Lola Montez's dog who was trained to bite Jesuits. But "nowadays there are scarcely any Jesuits worth biting," Dr. Gault concludes. He recalls being struck by a Jesuit "sadistic bully" in high school fifty-six years ago, but then writes in admiration of two teachers of introductory courses, one in high school and another in college, whom he found "incomparable." Yet Jesuits "bit off more than they could chew" by going into higher education. "Holy Cross College was a big disappointment," where "many Jesuits performed abysmally." (Couldn't that assessment apply to members of any faculty in any college, anywhere, anytime?)

All right. Most of us can look back on our education in the Society and outside with ambivalent feelings, but Dr. Gault is not interested in educational philosophy, much less educational autobiography. His point is that Jesuits are adept in navigating a boy's world—despite the occasional "sadistic bully"—but are ill equipped to deal with older students. College teachers, he believes, have the task of leading young men from adolescence to adulthood, but because of their vows Jesuits have absented themselves from grappling with the challenges of "wealth, sex, and power" and so remain adolescents themselves. He explains that they "have consecrated their lives to teaching," but "in exchange they didn't have to worry about the necessities of life." The Jesuit remains "a man among boys; a boy among men."

This chilling sentence leads him into the topic of sex-abuse among the clergy. The transition seems a bit too facile, especially considering that if the reports in the media are representative, a great number of priest-abusers seem to be members of the diocesan clergy, who do not have vows, at least not those of poverty and obedience. The abrupt transition shows that the real issue Dr. Gault wants to back into is celibacy: "the issue of incomplete adulthood. Celibacy may facilitate the consecrated life, but not the full and ordinary life." And his digres-

sion suggests that he finds a link between celibate incompleteness or immaturity and abuse. After quoting Paul's letter to Timothy, Dr. Gault returns to his argument that "a man can stop being a child without becoming a husband and father, but it isn't easy." And he repeats his conclusion as a question: he wonders whether "heroic virtue and fatal flaw may both derive . . . from one source: the Catholic clergy's incomplete personal entanglement in the perplexing challenges of full adulthood."

I hope I've been fair to the author's argument. A good essay provokes serious reflection, not acquiescence. That's the whole point of writing one. Any serious reader would have to object to several of Dr. Gault's characterizations, methods, and linkages, and the author could no doubt defend them creditably. This is called dialogue. I'm especially uneasy with my impression that his sense of a celibate priest comes very close to Walt Kowalski's. Still, he does have a point that should provoke serious reflection. After all the twists and turns on his parade route, I believe his subtitle, "What I Learned from the Jesuits," could be summarized in this way: a celibate clergy runs a great risk of remaining immature, and as such runs the greater risk of immature behavior.

This idea is scarcely a new revelation. In fact, it struck a very familiar major chord. I began theology at Woodstock in Maryland in 1966, when Dr. Gault was still in medical school. Vatican II had just ended, and as scholastics preparing for ordination in a few years, we were endlessly, and appropriately, engaged in discussions about the implications of our commitment to the Society and the priesthood "in the light of Vatican II," as the ubiquitous tag line of the day put it. I remember that several mimeographed copies of John Courtney Murray's conference entitled "The Danger of the Vows: An encounter with earth, woman and spirit" were being circulated and discussed. It was a particularly challenging and salutary topic for us to consider at that time in our lives. It was so valuable that early in 1967 *Woodstock Letters* sought permission to reprint the conference, but Father Murray declined, saying that he would have to update it "in the spirit of the Council," at which, we recall, he was a major figure. He never had the opportunity to revise the work. He died in August of that year. In a prefatory note, the editors explained Murray's reservations and their decision to publish the existing text "for its historical value" as a tribute to Father Murray. It appeared along with Walter Burkhardt's eulogy in the fall issue of 1967.[†]

Until I went from the e-version to a dusty bound volume and had access to the introduction, I had forgotten just how historical the conference was. Murray originally gave the talk on February 21, 1947. Wise man that he undoubtedly was, he was more aware than we were about the need for rethinking his reflections. World War II had just ended, and the ideal of manhood was the returning combat veteran, who had married, taken his bride away from unnatural defense work, and established a home in the suburbs. Murray must have acutely felt the

[†]The complete text is available at the website of the Woodstock Center at Georgetown. Just Google "John Courtney Murray vows."

disconnect between their lives and his. He was a product of the huge, impersonal seminaries of the era: philosophy at Weston, theology at Woodstock, and then graduate studies at the Gregorian University in Rome. Immediately after studies, he joined the faculty at Woodstock in 1937. The enclosed system became even more hermetically sealed during the war years, when scholastics were confined to barracks, since at least some Americans looked at their deferment as a form of draft dodging. He lived in an era of asking the treasurer for two dollars a week for personal expenses, having no contact with women at all in our canonically cloistered residences, and finding one's assignment posted on the bulletin board on the feast of the Sacred Heart. In 1947, that was his experience of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He was rightly critical, and perhaps even a trifle angry about Jesuit life. It's dangerous to live this way, he concluded.

During the twenty years since the initial conference, Murray became an internationally known lecturer and author; he endured the humiliation of being censured, wrestled with his personal integrity and devotion to the Society, resuscitated his work as a theologian, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in December 1960, and achieved preeminence by his work at the council. The Murray of 1967 was not the seminary professor of 1947. And it seems reasonable that his view of the priesthood and the vows would have matured to the point that he wanted to revise his earlier reflections before they were published.

In 1947 Murray begins his conference by telling the scholastic that "you run one supremely perilous risk—that of losing your manhood." In this perspective, poverty holds a risk because a man becomes a man by mastering the material universe, not fleeing from it and becoming dependent on others. Obedience provides an equally pernicious risk because a man must grapple with alternatives and choose his own purposes. He calls this personal decision making "the mark of virility."

But it is chastity that most interests us in this present context, and here readers must be most careful about reconstructing the historical period. According to Murray, man is Logos, Reason: woman is Zoe, Life. A man becomes a man by subduing the life principle, by imposing order on it. After citing a lengthy passage from *Paradise Lost*, Murray concludes that the sin of Adam was precisely his yielding to the suggestion of Eve. He puts it this way: "Man does not know himself aright until he knows he is head of woman, set above her, having her under his government. This is his part and person; and if he resigns it, he resigns his manhood." He concludes, "Again, it is woman who puts within the reach of man the act of man—the act of self-rule, through his rule of her." The vow of chastity, he believes, allows a man to avoid this encounter with Eve, to master her, and thus achieve his own manhood. "The chaste spirit risks being also the childish spirit." That is the statement of the problem. In one brief paragraph, Murray concludes his conference without providing the path toward an answer: "We have no time here for a solution," he says. "By taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, we risk irresponsibility, childish immaturity, and purposelessness."

Although Dr. Gault does not refer to Murray in his essay, their conclusions are remarkably similar. They find that the vows, particularly chastity, increase the risk of immaturity. Walt Kowalski would concur, I'm sure. I'm equally sure that they're on to something, but I wonder if the vow itself is the problem. If we look at examples of sexual immaturity leading to irresponsible, destructive, and even criminal behavior, we can find similar childishness among entertainers, artists, big-time athletes, academics, and political leaders. What is at the root of *their* immaturity? Can it be that they have allowed the public persona to overshadow the inner self to such an extent that the real person can protect himself from mature encounters with the outside world? I wonder if a Super Bowl ring or a Grammy Award might not be as big an obstacle to maturity as celibacy. Such men become their role: superstar or Pro-Bowler. They don't have to become a mature adult person if others see only the outside shell that their role has allowed them to construct. In a similar way, perhaps, when a living, breathing person appears only as "the priest," he may well run the risk of sealing off his humanity without giving it the opportunity to mature into an adult man.

Let's assume that some of these observations are right. What I find most refreshing about Mick McCarthy's essay is his relentless honesty in admitting the possibility that celibacy may indeed make us "strange." By any cultural standard, we have positioned ourselves beyond what is reasonable. This self-donation exacts a cost, and that cost might involve the risk of a truncated manhood or a lingering immaturity. For people who say that they are ready to surrender their "memory, understanding, and will," sacrificing some areas of maturity might not be a terrible burden. But why do it at all? This is where Mick moves the conversation forward. And he brings his formidable scholarship to the effort. Writers in the early Church have struggled with these questions before, and have concluded that the practice of celibacy is worth the potential risks. Do their observations make sense in our time? It's a challenging essay, and STUDIES is happy to present it for your reflection, delight, or outrage.

Richard A. Blake, S.J.

Editor

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For Paul:

9.16.1938–7.12.2010

Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

(Matt. 25.34).

My God, give yourself to me.
Give yourself again to me.
See, I do love.
But if it is too little,

Let me love more passionately.

I cannot easily measure my love:
To know how much is lacking
Or what is enough.
I want my life
To run direct into your embrace,
Not turning aside
Until I am hidden in the safety of your gaze.

This alone I know:
Apart from you I am miserable,
Both interiorly and exteriorly.

Every abundance
Which is not God
Is a total lack.

— Augustine, *Confessions* 13.8.9

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"Let me love more passionately"

Religious Celibacy in a Secular Age

Contemporary culture regards the celibate life as lived by vowed religious as simply "strange." Traditional functional explanations, based on freedom for ministry and for universal love for others, provide only a partial solution. Many early Christian writers, like Augustine, ground the practice in eschatological hope.

I. Introduction

"Living Chastity": From How to Why

In the Summer 2009 edition of Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits, Sonny Manuel offered "Living Chastity: Psychosexual Well-Being in Jesuit Life."[1] He proposed five active practices that will promote the health of a celibate. His psychological approach is extremely valuable. It provides insights and concrete suggestions for how a person might cultivate well-being as a celibate. A theological approach, while complementary, asks a different kind of question: why would someone desire to make a vow of chastity in the first place or to continue living it?

The present essay, therefore, is conceived as a companion piece that focuses principally not on *how* but on *why* one might live chastity. The answer to the question "why?" will—in one way or another—always be God. And because God is not some categorical object that can

[1] Gerdenio Manuel, S.J. "Living Chastity: Psychosexual Well-Being in Jesuit Life," Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits 41, no. 2 (Summer 2009).

be contained or possessed, the answer to the question "why chastity?" will always elude us. In some respects, though, that's the point. The decision to enter vowed religious life should never be made without sound reasons, to be discerned carefully over time and with growing insight into one's motivations. And yet, commitment as a celibate, like any act of love, surpasses the reasons that can be given as explanations. At any moment we have joys and pains, hopes and fears, strategies and failures that constitute our experience as celibates. God attends to us in those moments, and still our commitment looks forward in anticipation. It is a pledge of hope and trust that God will satisfy our desires and longings in ways we cannot now see or imagine. The "why" of celibacy implies an openness, a self-offering, a trust, and a tolerance for the unknown as we wait for God to become "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

Where I'm Coming from; Where I'm Going

I write both as a Jesuit and as a student of early Christianity. In the former role I have struggled for many years now to live with integrity as a celibate. Like most Jesuits, I would not want to reckon how successful I have been, but God both calls us to this life and gives us a variety of graces—sweet ones as well as dark ones—to fulfill it. In the latter role I have studied ancient patristic writings that offer a range of rationales and programs for celibacy, both among men and women. Some of these texts would strike twenty-first-century Jesuits as totally bizarre, and on first blush would appear to have no bearing whatsoever on religious life as we know it. Other aspects of the tradition, however, are quite wise and can help us a great deal, even a millennium and a half after they were written. Any tradition as vast and complex as the ascetic-theological literature of early Christianity will have to be applied carefully *ad experimentum*.

So this essay will consist of a variety of experiments that retrieve from the ancient sources elements that may be useful to our present condition. Later in this essay I will explain how I am using this concept "experiments." The overall structure, however, will include two main parts. First, I will discuss existential and theological issues related to understanding the vow of chastity in a secular age such as ours. Next, I will turn to patristic sources in an attempt to elicit four theological themes that frame ancient ways of understanding celibacy: (1) our radical thirst for God, (2) the strangeness and struggle of celibacy,(3) sacrifice, and (4) resurrection.

My purpose is not to provide a methodical justification of the vowed life on the basis of ancient sources. Aside from the fact that patristic writers were not usually systematic, I doubt very much that a systematic theology of celibate chastity would be helpful to anyone; on the contrary, I am convinced that it could do serious damage. Rather, I hope to tease out of these sources ways of thinking about celibacy as a path that opens us to the mystery of God. At their best, the early sources present celibacy as a way of seeking wholeness, of self-offering and conforming to the person and mission of Christ. They stress the generativity of celibates, how in their freedom they are signs of God's kingdom, of hope for the world to come. At the same time, the sources present culturally strange figures whose own marginality is itself part of the meaning of celibacy. This aspect of the tradition is likely to make us uncomfortable and generate resistance. But it may also provide a new way for understanding ourselves as being in solidarity with Jesus and the marginalized people he loved and served.

Before we turn to ancient Christianity, however, we should start by considering the existential and theological anxieties peculiar to our own age.

II. Religious Celibacy in a Secular Age

Our Pain: Who Will Be with Me When I Am Dying?

A few years ago I enjoyed a semester as a visiting professor at Loyola University Chicago. I was teaching a graduate course on the theology of St. Augustine. The class comprised about fifteen Jesuit scholastics in first studies and three lay students.

Halfway through the term I was meeting with one of the non-Jesuits about his final paper. Jeff was a recently married doctoral student, who was expecting his first child before the end of the semester.[2] In the course of our conversation, I asked Jeff what it was like to be in a class with so many Jesuits. He assured me that he found being in a class with so many men uniquely comforting.

"There is a sense of fellowship here that I really appreciate," he said. "I haven't felt this way since I went to a Jesuit high school, and I'm coming to realize how much I like it."

[2] The conversation reported here is shared with Jeff's permission.

"Is there anything awkward about being in a group of so many Jesuits?" I ask.

"Not at all," he replies. "But at times I find myself feeling sorry for them."

"How so?"

"It's hard to explain," Jeff says. "But I keep thinking about my grandfather. When he was dying, my grandmother stayed with him the whole time. She slept in a chair next to his hospital bed and almost never left his side. It may sound strange, but I wonder who will be with these guys as they are dying? Will they be alone? Who will stand up for them?"

His words surprised me. I had never thought of my life as a Jesuit in these terms before, and it seemed as if his reflection were out of place. After all, the Jesuits in class with him were still entering their prime of life and filled with energy, passion, and a sense of mission. I am sure concerns about old age were the last thing that troubled their minds, and any struggles they were experiencing with celibacy were hardly connected with end-of-life issues. So at the time, I didn't know whether to feel grateful for Jeff's compassion for his fellow students or offended at his sense of pity for us. In the years since then, however, I have often returned to what he said and recognize that Jeff was getting at something profound and complex. Although his thoughts and feelings were clearly informed by his experience as a new husband and expectant father, they also pointed to some core issues—existential and theological—related to celibacy. More and more I find his reflection compelling.

What initially attracted me to the Society of Jesus, for instance, was how "real" Jesuits seemed to be. I saw in them a level of engagement in the world that suggested religious faith was not separate from concerns of social justice, and at a personal level they connected with me in a way other religious people did not.

In offering the image of his grandfather, Jeff effectively created a different composition of place from which to consider what celibacy means. For most of my life, whenever I have reflected on celibacy, I haven't thought about the deathbed but about the marriage bed, about managing sexual desire and cultivating deep human relationships so as to encounter God in very concrete ways. I have prayed a lot about ne-

gotiating the tension between universal charity in my relationships and personal attachment to particular loves. In recent years, however, I have walked with enough Jesuits in their final days to wonder as Jeff wondered. I still think about sex and friendship, but I also ask a new set of existential questions. In many ways the deathbed, even in the *Spiritual Exercises*, functions as a symbol of ultimate limit, where in important respects we are deeply alone and look at our lives as a whole. From that place we may ask: Who, finally, will give witness to my life? As a celibate without spouse or children, who will know me well enough to notice, in an ultimate sense, what kind of a man I am? Who will remember me? Who will see and recognize the value of my life? Who will stand up for me? Who will hold me?

Our Hope: "My soul clings fast to you; your right hand upholds me" (Ps. 63:9)

For Christians, the answer to all these existential questions must ultimately be God. Furthermore, these questions are ones all people ask—not just men or women who happen to have a religious vow of chastity. But I also suggest that asking something such as "Who will remember me?" or "Who will give witness to my life?" has a unique resonance for a celibate.

As much as any Jesuit may accomplish in a life of generous service and as intimate as his friendships may be, I would argue that his relationship with the future of the world is different by virtue of his vows—and especially the vow of chastity. Although no one enters religious life for the recognition, the normal markers of accomplishment and attachment that give human beings natural satisfaction are less typical for us. Few of us will have our names on buildings or major books, and while most of us will leave behind people whose lives we have touched, sometimes profoundly, our lack of a more customary legacy, marital or filial, may make us uniquely fragile and liable to loneliness. It may also lead to unhealthy forms of compensation. Furthermore, two additional factors may also aggravate our sense of instability: diminishment in the number of people attracted to our way of life and a certain cultural disapproval (or at least absence of wide, ringing support) of religious life. We cannot easily imagine, much less control, how the future will evolve, and this reality may leave us unsettled. Rather than finding ways to defend ourselves against this feeling, we might recognize our vulnerabil-

ity as a singular grace, because it can dispose us more profoundly to the totality of the mystery of God, who alone is our future.

What does it mean, though, to say that God alone is our future? And what exactly is the connection between such a statement and the lived experience of someone who makes a religious vow of chastity?

I would like to suggest that, in our own times, making a vow of chastity (or any other religious vow) is best understood simply as a free act of faith, hope, and love. More importantly, in living out the vow of chastity over time, we are invited, often with great difficulty, to deepen our faith, hope, and love, as well as our freedom to place ourselves, again and again, before the mystery of God. If we believe that God has, in the past and present, freely revealed God's own love in ways that no one could have anticipated, so do we carry ourselves in faith and trust that God will do so again in the future. We wait for a new manifestation of love, given ultimately by God, not by human initiative. Our celibacy is a dramatic form of trust that God has prepared for us "what eye has not seen and ear has not heard and what has not entered the human heart" (1 Cor. 2:9). And if we can remain open to that possibility, whatever form it may take, our living out the vows with real faith, hope, and love can help generate the same virtues among the People of God.

Excessive emphasis on God's otherness can yield the impression that God is not present to our real condition. Too much focus on the life of the world to come can miss signs of God's reign here and now, as well as ignore its serious ethical demands on us.

All that may sound painfully obvious, but it can be easy to forget the strong connection between celibacy and the theological virtues. At our best, we Jesuits find celibacy a way to love others with great freedom and universality. And so it is. Our experience as Jesuits, one hopes, has been filled with very real human love, a deep sense of brotherhood and a desire for service. We naturally think about celibacy within a deeply incarnational theology that emerges from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. God is immanent; God dwells in all creatures; God labors for us. Celibacy is a framework for following Christ and serving him as he carries out his own mission.

Yet our understanding of celibacy can sometimes risk a kind of functionalism. For a large part of my religious life, for instance, when

asked by others what was the good of the vow of chastity, I explained that it increased my availability to go anywhere, to do anything, without attachment. While our vows are certainly ordered toward availability for mission with Christ, a narrow understanding of celibate chastity justifies workaholic patterns and will never be able to sustain a healthy religious life over the long haul. Even worse, it can become an excuse for never really engaging others in truly loving, deeply human ways. The meaning of celibacy as a lived vacancy where we attend God is compromised in a more functionalist habit.

Moreover, while an incarnational theology is crucial to what we believe, too exclusive a focus on the immanence of God has its liabilities. In those dark nights, for instance, when we feel alone or frightened or even abandoned, we encounter another side of God's mystery. As we have frequently been told, the Reign of God is both already and not yet. More and more we may be called to allow the "not yet" to shape our understanding of what it means to be poor, chaste, obedient. More and more it seems important to retrieve an appropriately eschatological understanding of the vows: not one that makes us "other worldly" but imagines the world as diaphanous to the transcendent mystery of a God who is wholly other and in whom we hope for a new heaven and new earth.

Eschatology Reconsidered

This eschatological orientation has always been a key feature in the theology of religious life. In the classic biblical source on celibacy from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks of those who renounce marriage for the sake of the Kingdom and counsels those able to accept it to do so (Matt. 19:12). Later in the same chapter, Peter asks with an anxiety that I have often felt myself: "Look, we have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?" (Matt. 19:27). Jesus responds that everyone who has left home and family will enjoy rewards many times over and inherit eternal life. In Mark's version the balance between the already and the not yet is even more clear. Those who have abandoned everything to follow Jesus will receive the hundredfold "now, in this age," while looking forward to eternal life "in the age to come" (Mark 10:30). Moreover, Jesus' celibacy is frequently taken as a sign of his eschatological vision.[3] Anticipation of the age to come deeply

[3] See John P. Meier, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person,* vol. 1 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 332–45.

informed Paul's early understanding of the value of celibacy, and late in the fourth century John Chrysostom tells his congregation about monks spread throughout the mountains of Syria: "Here already they meditate upon the things of the kingdom, holding converse with groves, and mountains, and with great quietness and solitude, and before all these, with God."[4] From its early generations the Christian tradition has validated the life of celibacy because it was seen as a concrete sign of hope that our prayer "thy kingdom come" shall be fulfilled.

If such eschatological orientation has always been an important part of the theological tradition on religious life, why are we so reticent to claim it in our discourse about our own celibate chastity? The answer, I suspect, includes historical, cultural, and theological reasons. Unlike early monastic orders, communities such as the Jesuits have represented a more apostolically oriented form of religious life than existed in the first millennium. For most Jesuits, the clearest and perhaps first motivation for celibacy is ministerial, and we are quick to assert, "We are not monks." While that is certainly true, what is interesting to me is how frequently we seem to say it in a defensive posture to protect our own religious culture. What initially attracted me to the Society of Jesus, for instance, was how "real" Jesuits seemed to be. I saw in them a level of engagement in the world that suggested religious faith was not separate from concerns about social justice, and at a personal level they connected with me in a way other religious people did not. They drank beer; they could talk about all kinds of things, from baseball to opera to the stock market; they possessed an intellectual and social credibility that was not overly "churchy." As John O'Malley has pointed out, in addition to the practical thrust of the *Spiritual Exercises*, our formation in secular academic disciplines has had a profound effect on who we are.[5] The early Jesuit principles of humanistic education for the civic good have made us a group of men less prone to (and perhaps constitutionally allergic to) "other worldliness."

But if one of our great gifts is helping people to find God in all things, it can also be difficult (at least for me) to remember that God is not contained by all things. The philosopher Charles Taylor has opined

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[4] John Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew* 68.3, in *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, sec. I, vol. X, ed. P. Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1888), 417.

[5] On "The Faith in Education," see John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 208–15.

that, since the Reformation, religious culture in the West has tended to identify flourishing in this life as its exclusive aim, and references to anything beyond that have fallen under some suspicion. He calls this trend the "immanent revolt" against a religiosity that had been perceived to exaggerate the transcendent. Yet Taylor notes the liabilities of the revolution.

> Exclusive humanism closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond—more, as though it weren't a crying need of the human heart to open that window, gaze, and then go beyond; as though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous world view, bad conditioning, or, worse, some pathology.[6]

Taylor argues that it is a mark of the "secular age" in which we live that people—even religious people—can now live without reference to the transcendent.[7] It would be unlikely (and to my mind represent a severely unfair accusation!) that Jesuits do that. Still, we cannot avoid being affected by our culture, and how we understand ourselves both defers to and defends against the reigning patterns of thought. Talking about celibacy, in such a context, presents us with a real problem. I suspect that when we Jesuits assert "we are not monks," we are in part reacting against a way of being that we perceive to be overly spiritualized and detached from the real world. But in the world we inhabit, the kind of renunciation that constitutes the vow of chastity makes very little sense, except in the functionalist understanding I have described. Any attempt to consider our celibacy in terms of a "transcendent window" places us at great risk of being utterly other to the world or (to use Taylor's word) "pathological."

Because it is truly a vocation, one must be given the grace to make religious vows, including the vow of chastity. To believe that one can think oneself into such a life would do untold damage.

[6] Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 26–27.

[7] See Taylor's monumental volume, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 3, where he outlines his project of examining the change "that takes us from a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."

But so it was also with the ancient ascetics who are our spiritual ancestors and so, frankly, it was with Jesus.[8]

Fortunately, to reaffirm the transcendence of God and to reappropriate an eschatological sense of our celibacy does not require that we devalue the world or adopt some kind of Gnostic picture that regards the flesh as essentially evil nor salvation a matter of escaping from this bodily state. There is no denying that many celibate and non-celibate Christians have, in practice if not in principle, espoused an idealized, other-worldly faith. Apart from the sheer difficulty of knowing what we're talking about when we speak of God's transcendence or the *eschaton*, such language has serious risks. Excessive emphasis on God's otherness can yield the impression that God is not present to our real condition. Too much focus on the life of the world to come can miss signs of God's reign here and now, as well as ignore its serious ethical demands on us. But to identify an eschatological approach with an other-worldliness is to set up a kind of straw man. Our theological resources are far more robust than that and give us the means to see far more continuity between the hope of this world and the life of the world to come. It is far beyond the scope of this essay to offer a full discussion of eschatology proper. Theologians will have different points of emphasis as they negotiate the inherent tension of holding together the "already" and the "not yet."[9] Most, however, would agree that Christ is the foundation of eschatology, that the whole movement of creation and salvation is toward a consummation, and that eschatology is therefore tied to what is happening now but also looks forward.

> Eschatology goes beyond the action of God in creation and salvation, explicitly affirming the introduction of something qualitatively different, new and transformative in the gift of eternal life. Our hope in the future is not simply about an optimistic development, or progress, or evolution of the present in an unending line.

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[8] For an interesting discussion of marginality, especially as it relates to Jesus, see Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 6–9.

[9] A helpful overview is that of Dermot A. Lane, "Eschatology," in *The New Dictionary of Theology,* ed. J. Komonchak, M. Collins, and D. Lane (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 329–42. For a characteristically subtle and systematic treatment, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life,* trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988). For a more recent treatment that warns against too disjunctive a framework for eschatology, see Dominic Doyle, "*Spe salvi* on Eschatological and Secular Hope: A Thomistic Critique of an Augustinian Encyclical," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (June 2010): 350–379.

> The logic of Christian hope is not the logic of inference but rather the logic of imagination.[10]

Our celibacy abides in the very tension of the "already" and "not yet" and calls us to look forward to the "qualitatively different."

An Attempt at Eschatological Appropriation

How the "logic of imagination" may operate in any one of us depends largely on the unique dispositions of each Jesuit. For what it's worth, let me offer my own, admittedly highly idiosyncratic approach, though each of us will have to find the words that are right for him. For myself, to reappropriate an eschatological orientation is to say something like this in prayer:

God, everything that I may achieve in life, the totality of virtues I may possess and good deeds I have done, as well as the sins I have committed—to me all these have meaning and value only in reference to you. I know you, and still you remain a mystery to me. You have loved me, and still I long for you even more. My celibacy is a wide space of openness that always waits for you. At times that space seems a room of love and passion; at times that space of openness seems a terribly empty place. But still I choose to wait for you. You give me this longing that only you can fill. You give me this trust in your love and ability to do something new—to shape me, to shape the world in ways I cannot fully imagine.

And there, somehow, I come to know Jesus, who also gave himself to you, in ways far more radical and complete than I ever could. And I feel his intense, youthful excitement that he was ushering in your Kingdom. And at times I think I understand his ability to give himself without reserve. Yet I also feel the kinds of resistance he faced and have inklings of the terrible darkness of his cross: his hanging there in abeyance, in abandonment, in the absence of you. I hear myself when he wonders why the Kingdom did not come as he imagined, why his generous plans did not turn out the way he first thought. I hear myself in the intense disappointment of his final lament: has my commitment been worth it? Have I persevered in vain? Is my celibacy nothing more than a humiliating nakedness?

And still with him, once more, I give myself to you, trusting that you will give witness to my life. I trust that you will remember me and hold me and raise me up in ways I cannot fully imagine.

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[10] Lane, "Eschatology," 342.

In the end, our celibate chastity is a free act of faith, hope, and love that cannot be explained or justified in term of Taylor's "exclusive humanism, [which] closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond."[11] But in this act we may configure ourselves more completely after Christ, who surrenders to his Father in a trust commensurate with his commitment.

For a variety of reasons, the ancient tradition may offer possibilities for approaching that transcendent window in ways that "a secular age" may find terribly strange or even forbid.

III. Experiments in Chastity

In the pages that follow, I will be turning to patristic sources in order to discuss four theological themes that were important to ancient understandings of religious celibacy. They are: (1) our radical thirst for God, (2) the strangeness and struggle of celibacy, (3) sacrifice, and (4) resurrection. Each section will conclude with a series of questions that both recapitulate the main points of the discussion and invite further reflection.

In speaking of "experiments" I am avoiding the promise of a systematic rationale. Rather, I am suggesting a method of engaged observation that leads to personal appropriation of virtues, values, and meaning. From the novitiate most of us come to understand what it is to be a Jesuit through the method of "come and see" (John 1:39). We try it out; we live in different communities and participate in various works, so as to know whether the shoe fits (as my novice director used to say). This kind of apprenticeship has deep roots in the ascetic tradition and is wonderfully exemplified in the famous fourth-century *Life of Anthony* written by Athanasius. The young Anthony visits various men of virtue and considers the particular traits of each. In one he observes graciousness, in another a devotion to prayer. He finds edifying one's freedom from anger, another's compassion, and still another's studiousness. He admires an elder's patience or simplicity or gentleness. In everyone, however, he marks their love for Christ and care for each other. "And having been filled in this manner, he returned to his own place of dis-

[11] Taylor, *Catholic Modernity?*, 26.

cipline, from that time gathering the attributes of each in himself, and striving to manifest in himself what was best from all."[12]

My belief that a systematic theology of celibacy is generally unhelpful derives from the conviction that we grow only gradually in our understanding of religious life by looking to good models, imitating them, and appropriating what we learn in a manner that uniquely fits who we are. We look for best practices and reflect on them. We also learn important lessons from bad examples. This process unsystematically includes the consideration of various models—ways of understanding celibacy—that may, for different people at different times in their lives illuminate the mysterious relationship between the vow of chastity and God. In speaking of "experiments in chastity," I am offering a variety of theological lenses, based on the early tradition, *tantum quantum;* that is, they are to be used or considered to the extent that they are helpful.

Warnings and Exhortations

Before continuing let me offer four preliminary caveats and an exhortation.

First, in offering theological frameworks for celibacy on the basis of the patristic tradition, I do not at all mean to suggest that the reasons themselves are sufficient for choosing such a life. Because it is truly a vocation, one must be given the grace to make religious vows, including the vow of chastity. To believe that one can think oneself into such a life would do untold damage. Each of us, therefore, must be careful to avoid the subtle temptation to approach any discussion of celibacy looking for self–justification.

Second, I am presenting here neither an argument for clerical celibacy nor even a discussion of it. Rather, this essay focuses on the kind of celibate chastity that Jesuits, as vowed religious, live out. As Sandra Schneiders has noted, terminology can be problematic.[13] We may speak of celibate chastity or consecrated chastity; in addition, the ascetic tradition uses a variety of words, such as "singleness" or "continence" (usually in reference to males) or "virginity" (usually in reference to females). Clearly, the range of terms involves different connotations for

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[12]Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony* 4, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980), 32–33.

[13]Sandra Schneiders, *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2001), 117–24.

most people living in the twenty-first century. Here, though, I will not be overly scrupulous in observing neat distinctions or definitions, but will use a range of terms on the assumption that they generally refer to the reality of our commitment as vowed, celibate men.

Third, many (if not most) ancient ascetic texts presume that chastity is morally superior to marriage. While the reasons for these views are complex and have had significant consequences for later Christian understandings of sexuality, it is generally unhelpful for us to argue on behalf of the privilege of permanent sexual renunciation. If anything, modern celibates may feel inferior to those who are married or sexually active. In this essay, I will presume that a life of celibate chastity is a distinct, even quite special, path to God with unique graces and trials. In doing so, however, I will not carry the burden of any claim as to its superiority or deny that analogous graces are present in other ways of Christian life.

Fourth, the ancient texts I will be presenting reflect a world view that is very different from ours. The world of late antiquity was highly patriarchal and had expectations of sex and gender quite unlike our own. Even though we may claim in these texts a common inheritance, we may disagree, for good reasons, with certain presuppositions. Some, for instance, may betray an overly spiritualized sense of the human person or a morbid, pathological distrust of sexuality or even misogyny. Although I will suggest ways of using these texts critically, reading ancient sources can be maddening and scandalous.

For early-Christian mystics, at least, ascetic restraint intensifies desire for God and transforms all longing by drawing us back to its origin.

Yet they can also be illuminating, and here is the exhortation. The real merit of considering the strange world of late *ancient* Christianity is its potential to complicate our *contemporary* world. There is a dual temptation in any generation to idealize its predecessors as well as to condemn them as benighted. When it comes to sexuality, a frequent leitmotif is the attribution of body-hating anxiety deep into the tradition. In a recent book, *Freeing Celibacy*, for instance, Donald Cozzens attributes Christianity's long suspicion of sex to a Manichaean kind of dualism "that influenced St. Augustine's negative judgment of sexuality."[14]

[14] Donald Cozzens, *Freeing Celibacy* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2006), 11.

A monochromatic judgment of the past, however, does not free us.[15] The view of Peter Brown on Augustine is applicable to the whole early tradition, and it is worth quoting him at length.

> On the issue of sexuality, we should be careful not to "demonize" Augustine. To speak of him as the "evil genius of Europe," and to lay at his door alone the ills associated with the handling of sex in Christian circles up to our own time, is to take an easy way out—as if by abandoning Augustine we have freed ourselves, by magic, from a malaise whose tangled roots lie deep in our own history. We have made our own bed over long centuries. Augustine did not make it for us. Denunciations of Augustine usually misrepresent him and, in any case, they get us no further in the serious, slow task of remaking that bed.[16]

If the ascetic tradition that leads up to our own practice of celibacy challenges us, then we should be confident enough to let it challenge us. The most interesting literature on ancient ascetic texts, for instance, comes from postmodern scholars who are not afraid to transgress against the standard picture of early-Christian celibates as sexually repressed. Rather, they argue on behalf of a "counter-erotics" that resists the normal boundaries of sexuality because the ascetics are so deeply attracted to God.[17] The monks and virgins, the hermits and other holy men and women, seem so strange because they *are* strange.

And so (if you haven't noticed) . . . so are we! The advantage of retrieving and wrestling with the ancient tradition is that it may allow us to reappropriate our own liminality. Of course, being at the edge of normativity is dangerous. But it not necessarily wrong. We should surely endorse practices that promote the psychosexual well-being of the celibate and hold that living chastity requires not only a charism but basic

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[15] On the wide varieties of practices and meanings of ascetic programs (pagan, Jewish, and Christian), see Richard Finn, O.P., *Asceticism in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[16] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 502.

[17] See, for example, Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Also see the essays in the collection *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006). Several essays challenge the influential assumptions made by Anders Nygren in his *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

psychological health. The tradition, however, pushes us to think outside the hygienic box, as we shall now see.

The Sex Lives of Celibates[18]

You lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you.
I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst.
You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

— Augustine, *Confessions*[19]

Since the early-third century, people have been aghast at allegations that Origen (185–253), when he was an impetuous man in his twenties, took too literally Jesus' claim that there are some who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom (Matt. 19:12).[20] Scholars debate whether or not he had himself castrated, and some have argued that it was merely an accusation leveled by his theological adversaries.[21] Many people who know nothing else about Origen are aware of this allegation, and over the years I have often heard Jesuits joke about the ancient suspicions. I believe that underneath such witticisms lies a certain anxiety we all carry with us: that the world around us uncritically associates celibacy with self-maiming.

At times we may feel such anxiety intensely, especially when we wonder whether "the world" may actually be fair in its judgment of us. Those of us living in a post-Freudian age have often heard, for instance, that religious passion is nothing more than sublimated sexual desire. Thus, the philosopher Georges Bataille begins his book *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* with a powerful claim: "The human spirit is prey to the most astounding impulses. Man *[sic]* goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him. The saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm, she does not know that his unspeakable passions and hers are really one."[22] It would be impossible, I think, not

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[18] With homage to Burrus' *Sex Lives of Saints*, n. 16.

[19] Augustine, *Confessions* 10.27.38.

[20] See Eusebius, History of the Church 6.8.2–3.

[21] For assumptions that he did, see Joseph Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 53–54. For an argument to the contrary, see Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Justin, Clement, and Origen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 67.

[22] Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (Salem, Mass.: Arno Press, 1984), 7.

to internalize some voices of suspicion, especially when we can identify, both in our own lives and in those of our fellow celibates, patterns Bataille describes. Do we go in constant fear of ourselves? How much do our religious ideals spiritualize primal libidinal urges?

These are good questions, which invite deepened personal honesty and self-examination. But they also bring us back to basic issues of faith. Is God real? Can I freely give myself to God in the hope that I will be brought to greater life? Or, in the prayer with which Ignatius sums up his *Spiritual Exercises*, does it really make sense to declare the love and grace of God as being "enough" for me?

To answer these questions in the affirmative requires of us a theological vision. This vision may seem naive and must always be open to revision. For the celibate the stakes are particularly high. If religious chastity is to be more than a repression of sexual desire or an anxious sublimation of our libido, then God must truly be love (1 John 4:8). We must authentically be able to love God and boldly live out of that love. We must be able to imagine a "counter-erotics," where "it is God who measures the unfurling expanse of such a sublime erotic ambition."[23]

For early Christian mystics, at least, ascetic restraint intensifies desire for God and transforms all longing by drawing us back to its origin. In discussing ancient texts, the literary theorist Geoffrey Harpham asserts that an ascetic practice such as celibacy does not exclude desire; it complicates it.[24] Writing to the virgin Eustochium, for instance, Jerome advises her to go alone to her room and "ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within."[25] Such nuptial metaphors are quite common in patristic literature, but (as in this case) the authors are usually men and the subjects are women. How a male audience would appropriate this sexually charged language is an interesting, delicate question. Sandra Schneiders has perceptively noted that, in the medieval literature, while male mystics do employ marital metaphors to speak of their vow of chastity, there is a higher degree of "spiritualization" than in tracts written by female mystics.[26] Clearly, for many reasons men might be squea-

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[23]Burrus, *Sex Lives of Saints,* 15. Burrus derives many of her ideas from the work of Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures,* SUNY Series in Postmodern Culture (Albany, SUNY Press, 1999).

[24] See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 46.

[25] Jerome, *Ep.* 22.25.

[26] Sandra Schneiders, *Selling All,* 426–27 n.37.

mish about applying bridal imagery to their experience of Jesus; and yet it would be a mistake, I think, to be entirely embarrassed by erotic language to communicate the motivation behind our vows. Many times in private Jesuits have confided that they wanted to enter the Society of Jesus because they were "in love with God" or felt "totally committed to Jesus." And I believe them. If that is nothing more than a sublimation of sexual desire or youthful exuberance or rhetorical exaggeration, then I am not sure there are any theological grounds for our vow of chastity.

The patristic tradition offers many ways of imagining God as the final object of desire, beyond what can ever be controlled or contained. In his *Life of Moses*, for instance, Gregory of Nyssa presents the great lawgiver as a role model for a Christian who wants to make a journey to God. Moses's experience at the Burning Bush "seems to me to belong to a soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived."[27] Gregory's famous doctrine of *epektasis* (lit., "stretching forward") teaches that our whole orientation as humans is to pursue a God who is inexhaustible. Moses thus learns that "the Divine is by its very nature infinite, enclosed by no boundary."[28] Still, all desire for God expands as one makes progress toward the final good. "This truly is the vision of God," Gregory avers, "never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more."[29]

Before Gregory, Origen regarded all human desire as derived from a divine eros, for God's own outward movement in the act of creation "implies the yearning desire of eros."[30] In a quasi-mythical vision represented in his work *On First Principles*, Origen imagines that, before the physical universe came into being, all spiritual creatures joined together as one community absorbed in the intense contemplation of God. Because these creatures were fashioned after the divine image, they are "partakers of the Word of God," implanted with the seed of wisdom and righteousness.[31] Like a consuming fire, God attracted spiritual crea-

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[27]Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.231, trans. A. Malherbe/E. Ferguson (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), 114.

[28]Ibid. 2.236 (115).

[29] Ibid. 2.239 (116).

[30]Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 119.

[31] Origen, *On First Principles* 1.3.6, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973), 35.

tures to deepen their divine likeness, but also left them free. Should they wish, they could turn away from the heat, and most did. All souls save that of Christ's seem to have "grown cold by the loss of [their] first natural and divine warmth."[32] They lost interest in God; they were beset "with weariness of the divine love and contemplation, and changed for the worse, each in proportion to his inclination in this direction."[33] This spiritual fall resulted in our alienation not only from God but from each other. And yet we did not lose our original longing.

Our whole life, in Origen's view, is an attempt to return to that primordial, expansive, infinite love. The slow, painful journey home is characterized by a restlessness and a thirst for God that nothing created can slake. This view is by no means unique to Origen or to ancient theology. Karl Rahner said much the same thing in what he famously observed about our unquenchable discontent and "the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable." He writes, "These elements are in fact tributary to that divine force which impels the created spirit—by grace—to absolute fulfillment."[34] Although Origen's language, like that of many ancient thinkers, tends toward a dualism, it would be unfair to convict him of regarding the material world as evil. Rather, through material creation we retrace our steps to return to our former state of intense concentration on God. Origen claims that the whole Trinity works ceaselessly through this process, so that we may be renewed at every stage of progress toward the holy and blessed life. "The more we partake of its blessedness, the more may the loving desire for it deepen and increase within us, as ever our hearts grow in fervor and eagerness to receive and hold fast the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."[35] Furthermore, like all material creation, our bodies are unfin-

When I think of the Jesuits I have known and lived with and loved in my life, it is striking to me how our unique physical constitutions largely condition our spiritual struggle to find God.

[32] Ibid. 2.8.3 (124).

[33] Ibid. 2.8.3 (125).

[34] Karl Rahner, "Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 4:184.

[35] Origen, *On First Principles* 1.3.8 (Butterworth, 39).

ished realities that undergo slow, painful transformations that we hope bring us ultimately back to God.[36.]

According to Origen, however, God mercifully adjusted each body to the peculiar needs of its soul down to the finest details, "much as the lines of each person's hand-writing remained unmistakably their own. Each person's relations with the body, therefore, had its own, unfathomably particular story."[37] It is worth lingering, if only momentarily, on this point, because it complicates our picture of Origen as an exemplar of dualistic thinking. Moreover, the point about bodies rings true. When I think of the Jesuits I have known and lived with and loved in my life, it is striking to me how our unique physical constitutions largely condition our spiritual struggle to find God. I think, for instance, of how much time we spend staying in shape at the gym, how others mourn the significant loss of eyesight or the ability to walk as they once did. I recall how often conversations at table turn to medical procedures, the state of our prostates or colons or skin. More or less openly we inhabit a range of individual appetites, orientations, tastes, obsessions, fears, addictions, moods, social proclivities. And from those highly distinctive sites we long for God—not with the intention that we escape whatever pleasures and pains may be related to our bodily state but that the extremely particular networks that make us who we are may be opened and transformed by their common orientation toward the infinite horizon of God.

Through a lifelong formation, which includes regular prayer and a constant searching for God in Scripture, a person's senses are transformed, so as better to "feel" in a very direct way the reality of God, just as skin can sense the heat of fire. Rahner calls these the "organs of mystical knowledge."

Celibates share the restlessness for God and desire for transformation with everyone else, but there is a representative quality about our choice. Our religious celibacy is an "existential icon," where we intentionally appropriate our aloneness, even cultivate our loneliness, as a sign of the "insufficiency of everything attainable" and as a pledge of

[36] Ibid. 2.2.2 (81).

[37] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 166.

our hope that our longing shall be filled by God.[38] And yet our experience of the Divine Lover seems as complex and fickle as any relationship. In a passage from a homily on the Song of Songs, Origen refers to his own experience of God. At times God seems very close, at other times terribly absent. Origen is always ready to return to God again, afresh.

> I have often perceived the Bridegroom drawing near me and being most intensely present with me; then suddenly he has withdrawn and I could not find him though I sought to do so. I long, therefore, for him to come again and sometimes he does so. Then, when he has appeared and I lay hold of him, he slips away once more; and, when he has so slipped away, my search for him begins anew.[39]

There are those moments when we experience warm feelings of faith; and there are moments when we really wonder whether God is real after all. But such is the life of faith, and in the long, slow process of living it we hope to cultivate what Origen calls "spiritual senses." Through a lifelong formation, which includes regular prayer and a constant searching for God in Scripture, a person's senses are transformed, so as better to "feel" in a very direct way the reality of God, just as skin can sense the heat of fire. Rahner calls these the "organs of mystical knowledge."[40] One can recognize God in all things, because he or she has been trained to regard all objects of sense or cognition in light of their divine source. On this view, the practice of chastity is part of a much larger transformation where everything in us, including our unique sexual desire, is awake to the mysterious reality of God: "what [is] at stake was no longer simply continence, but the hesitant, fragile growth of a spiritual sense of preternatural sharpness."[41] For Origen, the celibate strives to cultivate a sensitivity for a primary, original, uncreated love, which

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[38] For a discussion of celibacy as "existential icon," see Sandra Schneiders, *New Wineskins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today* (New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1986), 114–19.

[39] Origen, *Homily on the Song of Songs* 1.7, trans. R. Lawson, in *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Newman Press, 1956), 280.

[40] Karl Rahner, "Spiritual Senses according to Origen," in *Theological Investigations,* 16:81–103.

[41] Brown, *Body and Society*, 173. See the comment by Bernard McGinn that, for mystics, "human sexual desire is always an image of the true, not merely 'idealized,' eros. For these religious interpreters, the most sublime function of human eros and the language that represents it is to serve as a privileged symbol, a way of revealing the hidden higher reality" ("The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism," in

generates and motivates all other goods in life and through them calls all creation back to itself.

I have lived with and known men who possess this sensitivity. They are not perfect. They are not without their doubts or pains. But they live with a very real thirst for a God who cannot be controlled. And their example gives me great courage.

Reflection Questions

- *Does my experience of celibacy at times challenge me to wonder about the reality of God? How?*
- *"Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond" (Gregory of Nyssa). How does a sense of the "beyond" function in my religious life?*
- *Do I recognize in myself a conversation between my love for God and my love for creation? What are the contours of that conversation?*
- *Can I relate to Origen's desire for transformation through longing for God? To his experience of the apparent fickleness of the Divine Lover? What does this tell me?*
- *How does my unique relationship with my body contextualize my thirst for God?*
- *In what ways has my vocation allowed me to cultivate "spiritual senses"? What role does my experience of celibacy play in that?*

Holy Strangeness, Holy Struggle

So, even of Holiness
there is offal:
Just as there is sweat
and hair and excrement,
so Holiness too
has its offal.

— Nachman of Bratzlav, "The Torah of the Void"[42]

Mysticism and Language, ed. Steven T. Katz [Oxford University Press, 1992], 202–35, at 210).

[42] Nachman of Bratzlav, "The Torah of the Void," trans. Zalman Schachter, in *Exiled in the Word: Poems and Other Visions of the Jews from Tribal Times to Present*, ed. J. Roth-

When the ambitious Augustine moved to Milan in order to take his post as professor of rhetoric in the capital, he found himself profoundly impressed by the local bishop, Ambrose. Because his own father, Patricius, had little positive impact on the young Augustine's life, he was always seeking paternal figures with whom he could identify. In North Africa he encountered the Manichaean teacher Faustus, a man "of pleasant and smooth speech" (*Conf*. 5.6.10) but not possessed of wisdom. In Italy, by contrast, he met Ambrose, "known throughout the world as the best of men," and recognized in him a person of substance (*Conf*. 5.13.23). Initially charmed by his eloquence in preaching to a large congregation, Augustine came to feel affection for Ambrose on account of his personal kindness to him. Little by little he was drawn by the content of the bishop's teaching, not simply its style. He prays to God, "Unknowingly I was led by you to him, so that through him I might be led, knowingly to you" (*Conf.* 5.13.23).

In Augustine's mind, the great Ambrose had nearly everything that he could identify as a measure of success and good fortune. He was well born, educated, eloquent, respected, self-confident, and wise. Even more, Augustine recognized his mentor as a man of God and as someone he wished more and more to emulate. "It was only his celibacy," Augustine says, "which seemed to me such a burden" (*Conf.* 6.3.3).[43] At this point in his life, Augustine was not thinking of becoming a priest or monk. For over fifteen years, he was all but married to someone he clearly loved and even had a child with her. Still, he wanted to know what makes Ambrose tick. What were his hopes, his struggles and temptations? How did he find the encouragement he needed to persevere? And how did he manage his celibacy?

It is worth lingering briefly on Augustine's bewilderment, as it is one of the few expressions in antiquity of a dynamic that may be familiar to many Jesuits. A family member, friend, or sympathetic admirer, who may see and validate much good in our lives, is perplexed or even scandalized at our renunciation. Their attitudes vary and may include a mix of reactions, from romanticized notions of religious life that set us on a pedestal as exceedingly self-disciplined and holy men, to good-humored condescension that may regard us as an odd but basically good "group of guys," to a scorn and suspicion that we are engaged in a lifestyle that is essentially disordered and reflective of the sexual

enberg and H. Lenowitz (Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon Press, 1989), 53.

[43] *Conf.* 6.3.3: "Cælibatus tantum eius mihi laboriosus videbatur."

dysfunction frequently attributed to the Catholic Church. For many of us, this is the kind of space where we are met. Many people are as curious about our celibacy as Augustine was about Ambrose's. The effect can be painful and we can feel very alone, especially if we sense that we are judged or misunderstood or even idealized. And yet we would be ignoring reality if we did not acknowledge and own that we are, in important ways, strange.

There is much to learn in the way Ambrose is presented in this section of the *Confessions*. Although the inquisitive young Augustine was "intent on searching and restlessly eager for argument," Ambrose was centered, collected, focused. His celibacy was in the ancient philosophical tradition of practicing sexual continence.[44] I like to think that he knew there was no way he could convince Augustine of the validity of his celibacy, apart from the quality of his own life. At the time Augustine most wanted to ask about, if not pry into, Ambrose's heart, the bishop was reading silently. Much has been made of Augustine's astonishment that Ambrose would read Scripture without vocalizing the text. Yet Ambrose's silent, prayerful reading reflects his own advice to those priests who must preach: "Now what ought we to learn before everything else, but to be silent, that we may be able to speak?"[45] Anyone charged with the duty of teaching others must first listen humbly to the interior master and quietly attend to the words of Scripture. Grounded in God, we might imagine Ambrose supremely uninterested in offering justifications to the young man who cannot quite figure him out, and Augustine is clearly disappointed that "no opportunity at all was given me to find out what I longed to know from your holy oracle, Ambrose's heart" (*Conf.* 6.3.4).

As urbane as Ambrose was, it is important to link his celibacy, not only to the serene tradition of philosophers' continence, but also to the solitary figures associated with the Christian tradition: John the Baptist, Jesus, the fathers of the Egyptian desert, the holy men and women of Syria. All these people inhabit a marginal space, but such liminality is constitutive of who they are and points to a God who cannot be domesticated. While few of us would directly opt to be marginal figures, avoiding the strangeness inherent in the tradition of celibacy amounts to a serious denial. John the Baptist's ascetic carriage and behavior are

[44] On the non-Christian philosophical tradition of celibacy, see Finn, *Asceticism in the Greco-Roman World*, 9–33.

[45] Ambrose, *De officiis* 1.2.5

remarkably antisocial. The question of Jesus' celibacy has been debated in recent years. Some scholars regard it as unthinkable that a Jewish rabbi of the first century could be celibate.[46] Others acknowledge that Jesus' celibacy is unusual but historically probable. Like his parables, Jesus' celibacy may well have been meant to disturb people into thinking about the Reign of God, which he preached in word and deed.[47] The Desert Fathers, revered for their wise *Sayings*, were largely rude and unlettered. Their contemporary Eunapius of Sardis complained, "At that time they brought into the holy places so-called monks: men by all appearances, though they lived like pigs."[48] The holy men of Syria, such as Simeon the Stylite, performed hyper-ascetic practices that functioned as a "long drawn-out, solemn ritual of dissociation—of becoming the total stranger."[49]

Thus the desert takes on enormous symbolic importance in the literature of early Christianity. As the antithesis of normal civic society, the desert is a vast and dangerous place.

There is nothing inherently sacred about being strange, and I don't want to valorize celibacy just because it is unusual. But sociologically the ascetic who stands outside the bounds of family and economic ties is often given a unique power to broker reconciliation within communities. He does so because he is perceived to be impartial to social attachments and intimate with a God who transcends boundaries and cannot be contained or controlled. Thus the "holy man" is in a unique position to heal. He knows a God who is mystery. People are encouraged to stand up when they encounter monks "for they speak with God without interruption and their lips are holy."[50] Although today many people have more comfortable, even

[46] See William E. Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 149: "If historical probability favors a married Jesus, as I think a judicious examination of the life and times of Jesus suggests, this subverts the Christian celibate's claim that he is following Jesus' pattern more closely."

[47] Meier, *Marginal Jew,* 344.

[48] Eunapius, *Vitæ Sophistarum,* vii (Ædesius), 11. Cited in *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, by Philip Rousseau (University of Notre Dame, 1978), 9.

[49] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 131.

[50] *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Pambo 7, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 197.

domesticated, images of God, the particular wisdom of the Desert Fathers is the apophatic insight that God is like the geography they themselves inhabit: hidden from sight, known only in an unknowing love by those who are emptied in order to find God at the center.[51] Thus the desert takes on enormous symbolic importance in the literature of early Christianity. As the antithesis of normal civic society, the desert is a vast and dangerous place. But into this danger hosts of people, following Anthony's lead, fled to find God. Celibacy is part of a larger assumption of the risk to empty oneself before God. This full range of attendant renunciations make the celibate very strange.

Seeking God in the desert includes a constant struggle depicted in dramatic narratives of combat between demons and individual ascetics. When Anthony, for instance, decides to give his life over to Christ, the devil attempts to lead him away from his ascetic discipline. After raising many doubts in Anthony's mind, the devil "places confidence in the weapons in the navel of the belly"—a tactic especially useful against young men. Anthony resists titillating thoughts, and so the devil "assumes the form of a woman and to imitate her every gesture, solely in order that he might beguile Anthony."[52] The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* have multiple examples of the monk's difficulties with sexual temptation. Abba Abraham asks an elderly monk who claims he had overcome fornication, "If you were to find a woman lying on your mat when you entered your cell would you think that it is not a woman?" When the old man replies that "I should struggle against my thoughts so as not to touch her," Abraham says, "Then you have not destroyed the passion, but it still lives in you although it is controlled."[53] Sexual fantasies are constant companions to the monks. As a brother complains to Abba Cyrus, "My thoughts are about old and new representations of [wom-

If our vow of chastity is a free act of faith, hope, and love, then we must own the awkwardness and interior conflict we may feel in terms of the larger struggle for faith, hope, and love.

[51] Belden Lane, in his *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 11, provides an excellent discussion of the "desert habitus."

[52] Athanasius, *Life of Anthony,* 5 (Gregg, 34).

[53] *Sayings,* Abraham 1 (Ward, 33).

en]. It is their remembrance that overcomes me."[54] Another monk confides in Abba Paphnutius that "even if I take ten wives, I shall not satisfy my desire." So he leaves the desert and returns to the city, where he gets married, finds that a real marriage partner is not the idealized figure he had imagined, and returns to the desert.[55]

For us it may not be prudent to overindulge in obsessive patterns that lead to heightened anxiety over sexual thoughts. But a struggle peculiar to our celibacy is a real and significant part of our lives. We are, in important ways, dispossessed, and we mourn what we do not have—at times with great agony. It would be as much a mistake to exaggerate the importance of sexual conflict in the lives of the monks as it would be to exaggerate it in our own lives. Although ascetic writers spend significant energy suggesting ways to manage erotic fantasies, sexual temptation is only one of many that lead to the unraveling of a monk's resolve. The great monastic theoretician Evagrius of Pontus recognizes the corrosive effect of anger both on a person's prayer life and his ability to live in community: "Do not give yourself to the thought of anger, fighting in your intellect the person who hurt you."[56] This kind of fantasy brings darkness to the soul with an intensity as severe as sexual thoughts. Evagrius speaks too of acedia, which is remarkably close to what moderns call "depression." This "noonday demon" is "the most oppressive of all the demons." It leaves the monk wondering whether his life is worth it, instilling a distaste for his place and making him think of other places where life seems easier. It "deploys every device in order to have the monk leave his cell and flee the stadium."[57] Thus in the ancient ascetic literature, the struggle of a celibate is waged within a far wider array of existential issues than the concern for sexual fantasies.

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[54] *Sayings,* Cyrus, 1 (Ward, 119). For discussion of an issue that caused the monks special concerns, see David Brakke, "The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt, and Gaul," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* (1995): 419–60. The subject is particularly interesting from the point of view of gender studies. Patristic literature more commonly uses the female body to reflect on purity and the identity of the Church, but anxiety over wet dreams is a uniquely male concern.

[55] *Sayings,* Paphnutius (Ward, 170). We may rightly ask what came of the poor wife he abandoned.

[56] Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos* 23, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz, in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 101.

[57] Evagrius, *Praktikos* 12 (Sinkewicz, 99). For a more recent treatment, see Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008).

The spiritual combat experienced by people like Anthony is a fight not to lose heart but to keep the faith and live the life to which he has been called.[58] The pedagogical function of works such as the *Life of Anthony* is to offer models of those who persevere in hope and trust. As David Brakke has noted in his work on spiritual combat in early Christianity, "The demons attack 'all Christians' who make progress in virtue, 'but especially monks.'"[59]

Where does this discussion of ancient monks lead us? In their own way, this great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1) invites us to appropriate the strangeness of our lives as celibates in a secular age as well as the various struggles we encounter on account of it. If our vow of chastity is a free act of faith, hope, and love, then we must own the awkwardness and interior conflict we may feel in terms of the larger struggle for faith, hope, and love. And in our perseverance we may hope to live out our conviction that it is worth it, that God, who is wholly other, is worth committing ourselves to. In doing so, even in our loneliness, we may be a sign to others who find themselves, in other ways, strange and struggling: with loneliness, with faith in God, with any of the other things that render humans so fragile.[60]

Years ago a middle-aged Catholic priest reflected on the existential loneliness of his celibacy. But he also went on to say: "My loneliness has a 'voice.' There is a Presence within the void. Deep friendships have brought me to this, and the inevitable good-byes. I meet my loneliness. And I learn that nothing else remains to be discovered except compassion." He recalls a card he received once from the mother of eight, who responded to homilies he gave about loneliness: "Thank you, Father, for helping us enter into areas where we ourselves would fear to venture alone." If appropriated with real prayer and discernment, the

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[58] For a more directly Ignatian comparison, consider the article by Joseph Conwell, S.J., "Living and Dying in the Society of Jesus or Endeavoring to Imitate Angelic Purity," STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS (May 1980): 13, where Jesuit chastity is a summary of one's religious life. Conwell's thesis is that Ignatius's famous reference to imitating the purity of the angels is a call to the lifelong task of centering our lives, more and more, on God.

[59] David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 24. See too Brakke's *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 226–30, in which he notes that the ascetic's integrity is to be a reflection of Christ's divine integrity.

[60] On sexual incompleteness as solidarity with the poor, see Ronald Rolheiser, *Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 209–10.

strangeness and struggle of the celibate become a holy strangeness, a holy struggle. Although apparently waged alone, these painful aspects of his existence can render him in profound solidarity with others' vulnerability. Being a-lone before God reveals we are all-one before God. The same author concludes that his experience touches on the "raw reality and deepest rumblings of the human spirit."

> All the arguments for celibacy break down when that specter of loneliness just below the surface begins nudging at my together world. And the world of loneliness—a starkly honest naked world—comes up to meet me, and I sense the disarming presence of my God. Nothing tangible. But there. "Be still and know that I am God."[61]

Reflection Questions

- *As a celibate, in what ways am I encountered as "strange"? What feelings does that elicit in me? When I bring such feelings to God in prayer, how does God respond?*
- *Am I comfortable appropriating our unique marginality? Am I fearful? In what ways does it help me in my ministry? Does it invite me to a solidarity with Christ? With those Christ loves?*
- *What does the strangeness of celibacy say about the otherness of God?*
- *How have my own struggles with celibacy changed over the course of my vocation? What is God communicating to me as I reflect on this history?*
- *Can I distinguish "holy strangeness" from social or emotional immaturity? When is the ascetic struggle an exercise leading me closer to God, and when is it a form of obsession or neurosis?*
- *What "voice" does my loneliness have? Does it render me more compassionate? When does it open me to God and others? When is it associated with self-imposed isolation or withdrawal?*

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[61] Patrick Connolly, "A Priest's Thoughts on His Own Celibacy," in *Celibate Loving: Encounters in Three Dimensions*, ed. Mary Anne Huddleston (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1984), 138–39.

Dangerous Sacrifice

What I ask
is that you
remember
. . . how you stood

one
by
one

and said
with
quiet confidence

I am ready
and
willing.

— Christine Rodgers, "On the Edge of Surrender"[62]

For many reasons, religious language of sacrifice is deeply troubling. In cultures throughout human history, sacrifice includes the destruction of a victim, whether an animal or a fellow human, to satisfy God. Behind biblical stories such as the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) and Jepthah's killing of his daughter (Judg. 11) lurks the phenomenon of child sacrifice, though the vast bulk of the Hebrew Bible asserts that God takes no pleasure in such sacrifices. New Testament texts appropriate sacrificial themes in their presentation of Christ's life and mission, but throughout Christian history there has been a wide range of "takes" on the sacrifice of Christ. Some understandings of atonement imply divine violence. At a far less theoretical level, "sacrifice" means many things. Consider, for instance, a homey anecdote with which Robert Daly, S.J., begins a book that represents his life work:

> "Have you found out what sacrifice is?" asked the pastor when the children, after having been segregated from the grown-ups for the Liturgy of the Word. "Yes!" triumphantly answered the religious-education teacher. "Sacrifice means giving up what you love."[63]

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[62] Christine Rodgers, *Embracing the Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Green Heart Press, 2010), 5–7. Used with permission.

[63] Robert J. Daly, S.J., *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 1.

To consider celibacy according to such a notion of sacrifice not only casts a very negative light on a major area of our lives, but a religious culture that would so easily valorize "giving up what you love" is highly suspect. It can legitimate many cruelties and abuses, great and small. It can contribute to a notion of celibacy that is psychologically damaging and spiritually untenable.

And yet much would be lost if we jettison the concept of sacrifice entirely as a way of understanding our vow of chastity.

While recognizing and disavowing the "darker" aspects of sacrifice, patristic writers frequently appropriated biblical language of temple and sacrifice and applied it to the life of celibacy. The requirement of ritual purity for an oblation to be worthy was often transferred onto the person with a vow of chastity. Thus Paul's exhortations to people to consider themselves as "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 3:16–17) and "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1) are "displaced from their early ascription to *all* Christians and arrogated to the celibate alone."[64] The virgin's body is a "sacred vessel." Methodius of Olympus calls the community of those who are chaste "God's unbloody altar . . . kept absolutely pure and undefiled . . . sending forth to the Lord the sweet odor of Love."[65] In this and other examples, Christian authors are quick to distance themselves from the unclean rites of pagans and Old Testament figures. Chrysostom, for instance, regards the virgin's sacrifice as superior to those of the Jews, and Athanasius stresses that, unlike the temple cult, the consecrated celibate is whole, undivided, and undistracted by things of this world. He cites the Song of Songs and Psalm 44 in a letter to virgins who have made pilgrimage to Jerusalem: "Then truly 'you are beautiful' (Song 4:7). Then 'the king will desire your beauty' (Ps. 44:12)—if you are a whole burnt offering, undivided."[66]

Although these interpretations were fairly common throughout the ascetic tradition, Jesuits of the twenty-first century are unlikely to find much value in such spiritualized renditions of virginal consecration. The ideals of purity, of single-heartedness, of integrity and wholeness do, however, remain a value for us, just not in terms of offering an

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[64] Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 212.

[65] Methodius, *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity* 5.4.6, in *Ancient Christian Writers,* trans. Herbert Musurillo (New Jersey: Paulist, 1958), 88.

[66] Athanasius, "Second Letter to the Virgins," 4, trans. from Syriac, in Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism,* 292–302, at 294.

immaculate victim, untouched by the "impurities of the flesh."[67] Again, though, Daly draws from the larger theological tradition a vision of sacrifice that is far more interpersonal and reorients overly stylized pictures of a commitment to chastity. He insists that a genuinely Christian notion of sacrifice focuses foremost on a mutual self-giving between persons. The reception of God's own self-gift prompts a response, and the dynamic is essentially Trinitarian. Christian sacrifice is authentic "when we, in human actions that are empowered by the same Spirit that was in Jesus, begin to enter into that perfect, en-Spirited, mutually self giving, mutually self-communicating personal relationship that is the life of the Blessed Trinity."[68] Like other forms of Christian sacrifice, celibacy requires the kind of personal integration and reception of Christ's spirit that in turn renders us capable of offering ourselves to God in trust and generosity. How an individual celibate may make that offering depends largely on his or her unique context and disposition. The dynamic, however, is less a matter of giving up what we love than it is of assimilating ourselves to the one we love.

This understanding of sacrifice coheres more easily with the patristic understanding of celibacy as a way to imitate Jesus' own openness to God. Augustine, for instance, thus urges those who have consecrated themselves to chastity: "Hope in him more gladly, because you serve him more earnestly. Love him more ardently because you serve his pleasure more attentively." He then goes on to emphasize Jesus' own celibacy: "Follow the Lamb, because without doubt the body of the Lamb is virginal too. . . . Rightly you follow him by virginity in body and heart, wherever he goes."[69] Augustine's exhortation to "follow the Lamb" wherever he goes is a call to imitate him and walk in his footsteps—even in his suffering. This idea should not be foreign to Jesuits who seek to be companions of Jesus. It coheres with the graces of the Second and Third Weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Moreover, while few of us would count

Unlike Ambrose with his apparent serenity, Augustine is famously public about his struggle with celibacy.

[67] Methodius, *Symposium* 5.4.6 (Musurillo 88).

[68] Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled,* 5.

[69] Augustine, *On Virginity* 27.27, trans. Ray Kearney, in *Marriage and Virginity* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 85.

Jesus' celibacy as the most important aspect of his being, it is potentially an area that, in our own prayer, we may find an imaginative identification with him.[70]

Yet the "Lamb" Augustine urges us to follow is the sacrificial lamb, whose own self-offering is central to our understanding of who God is. In one of the best treatments of Christian sacrifice in patristic literature, Augustine offers this definition: "The true sacrifice is offered in every act that is designed to unite us to God in holy fellowship, every act, that is, which is directed to that final Good by which we are able to be truly happy."[71] It is important to note his claim that sacrifice is authentic and makes us happy only to the extent that it draws us to God. Prayer, whether of contrition or praise, is a sacrifice that renders our deepest selves to God. Thus Augustine comments on Psalm 55:12 ("Your offerings of praise which I shall render to you, O God, are within me"): "From the casket of the heart offer incense of praise. From the cellar of a good conscience offer the sacrifice of faith. . . . O riches interior, where the thief does not approach. God himself gave what God received."[72] Every act of real compassion, he adds, is a sacrifice to God.[73] Augustine is clear that such compassion is grounded on the nature of the Trinity, whose love is revealed to us in the self-giving of Christ and shared with us in the gift of his Spirit.[74] What we call religious vows are a participation in that same sacrifice.

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[70]See the suggestive comment of Rolheiser in *Holy Longing*, 209–10, that Jesus' celibacy, in addition to being an eschatological sign, was part of his solidarity with the poor: "How so? Simply put, when Christ went to bed alone at night he was in real solidarity with the many persons who, not by choice but by circumstance, sleep alone. The poor are not just those who are more manifestly victimized by poverty, violence, war, and unjust economic systems. There are other less obvious manifestations of poverty, violence, and injustice. Celibacy by conscription is one of them."

[71] Augustine, *City of God* 10.6 trans. Bettenson (Penguin, 1984), 379, slightly modified: "Proinde verum sacrificium est omne opus quo agitur ut sancta societate inhæreamus Deo, relatum scilicet ad illum finem boni quo veraciter beati esse possimus." For a discussion of the Latin tradition on sacrifice, see Gerald Bonner, "The Doctrine of Sacrifice: Augustine and the Latin Patristic Tradition," in *Sacrifice and Redemption,* Durham Essays in Theology (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 101–17.

[72] Augustine, *En. in ps.* 55.19. Compare this point with the famous formulation in *Conf.* 10.29.40: "Give what you command, and command what you will."

[73] Augustine, *City of God* 10.6.

[74] See ibid., 10.20, among others.

> For sacrifice is a "divine matter," in the phrase of the old Latin authors, even if it is performed or offered by a human. Hence a man consecrated in the name of God, and vowed to God, is in himself a sacrifice inasmuch as he "dies to the world," so that he may "live for God." For this also is related to compassion, the compassion a man shows towards himself.[75]

Crucially, Augustine's conception of the sacrifice of consecrated life does not devolve into the kind of violence so evident in much religious language. "Dying to the world" must be done with compassion for oneself. Nor does Augustine's description here include the idealized portrait of chastity that we have seen elsewhere. Augustine offers a compelling theological framework for understanding our celibacy as sacrifice.

And yet he also admits it is not easy. At times our sacrifice, even when offered freely and in response to God's own self-offering, seems so hard to make. In the end, it *does*, at times, feel as if celibacy entails giving up something you love. If we may wish more and more to imitate the interior wholeness of Jesus in his self-offering, in important ways we also do not want that. Our resistance does not simply pertain to erotic attachments. In ways that may be fiercer still, we struggle mightily to yield our own will, to surrender our sense of power, self-determination, or self-importance, to loosen our grip on tightly held securities, or to allow the narcissistic injuries we have sustained to be healed. A silent, humble letting-go often comes so hard that it feels like a painful holocaust, where we are completely burned. We must be clear that "dying to the world" is terribly difficult. When Augustine says that we must do so with compassion for ourselves, I take him to mean that we must gently but surely open our lives to God and place our hope in Christ's power to heal us even when our egos are deeply wounded.

Unlike Ambrose with his apparent serenity, Augustine is famously public about his struggle with celibacy. For reasons that are not immediately evident to all readers of the *Confessions*, he identified becoming a Christian with sexual renunciation, and thus his decision to be baptized is an intensely aggrieved process culminating in his conversion at the words of Paul's letter to the Romans: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires" (*Conf*. 8.12.29). Although many commentators have noted how mixed Augustine's legacy in the history of sexuality has been, to say nothing

[75] Ibid., 10.6.

of Christian theology of the West, his *Confessions* give a magnificent insight into the complex dynamics of a conflicted will. While many Jesuits find his famous prayer humorous, most recognize that it expresses a reality with which they can deeply identify: "Lord, make me chaste and celibate, but not yet" (*Conf.* 8.7.17). Even as a bishop, Augustine admits his interior divisions (*Conf.* 10.30.41).

Discourse on celibacy in ascetic texts frequently turns around the ongoing desire for wholeness. Whether in language of purity or singleness of heart, the wholeness we seek approximates the heart of Jesus. Both Evagrius and Cassian, for instance, "thought of purity of heart as progressive and consisting of degrees of achievement."[76] The monk, for instance, who has achieved such purity has his loves completely ordered toward God, yet this is largely a reality still to be realized. As Augustine tries to offer himself completely to God in the eighth book of the *Confessions*, he gives a brilliant account of a tension most people feel. We seem incapable of effecting the very things we want most. Augustine desires to abandon himself to the mercy of God and make an act of faith. "Let it be now," he says. "I would almost achieve it, but then fall just short. . . . Then I would make a fresh attempt, and now I was almost there, almost there. . . . I was touching the goal, grasping it . . . and then I was not there, not touching, not grasping it" (*Conf.* 8.11.25). This complex pattern of wanting and yet not wanting reflects for Augustine the core paradox of what it is to be a human being, created so that our hearts are restless until they rest in the divine "Thee" but still resisting it. Yet it is precisely within this struggle and even trial that a person comes to know and define who he or she is, and Augustine is fond of quoting the Book of Job, "Is not human life on earth a trial/temptation?" (Job 9:1).

All Christians give themselves in whatever state of life in which they may find themselves. For celibates the day-to-day offering will be distinct, because our struggle for moral, spiritual, and emotional wholeness is conditioned by the real set of choices we have made to "follow the Lamb."

A person's sacrifice, therefore, takes place in degrees, and in his larger theological vision, Augustine grants that any sacrifice is finally valid only to the extent that it is shaped by Christ's sacrifice, which alone

[76] See Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 43.

is pure. But even Christ's sacrifice has an eschatological significance, insofar as it is related to the emerging sacrifice of the whole Church. In an important passage on the Christo-ecclesial ground of sacrifice, Augustine writes that as the true Mediator, Christ receives sacrifice "in the form of God," while "in the form of a servant" he makes himself the sacrifice. "This is the reality, and Christ intended the daily sacrifice of the Church to be the sacramental symbol of this; for the Church, being the body of which he is the head, learns to offer itself through him."[77] Our assimilation to Christ, who continues to give himself to us, takes place in the context of the Eucharist, which itself has an eschatological scope. As Geoffrey Wainwright notes: "At the eucharist Christ is present to the eyes of faith: at his table in the final kingdom we shall see him face to face."[78] All Christians give themselves in whatever state of life they may find themselves. For celibates the day-to-day offering will be distinct, because our struggle for moral, spiritual, and emotional wholeness is conditioned by the real set of choices we have made to "follow the Lamb."

To make that sacrifice, however, God must give what God will receive. We look for the kind of grace that will empower us. As Augustine was on the verge of making his offering, he recognized in himself his old friend, despair, who planted doubts that he would ever be able to stay chaste. At that point he is given a revelation "from that country toward which I was facing, but into which I trembled to cross." It is a vision of Continence: dignified, cheerful, and calm. She coaxes him with an honorable charm and shows him many holy men and women who have been chaste. Smiling, she asks whether these examples achieved virtue on their own. "Could any of them achieve it by their own strength, without the Lord their God?" Assuring Augustine that God gave the grace of Continence, she invites him: "Why try to stand by yourself, only to lose your footing? Cast yourself on him and do not be afraid: he will not step back and let you fall. Cast yourself upon him trustfully; he will support and heal you."[79]

The ability to make sacrifice, as Robert Daly rightly notes, comes only through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ.

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[77] Augustine, *City of God* 10.20 (Bettenson, 400–401).

[78] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (Oxford University Press, 1981), 147.

[79] Augustine, *Conf.* 8.11.27.

Reflection Questions

- *How has my understanding of celibacy been informed by notions of sacrifice? Which notions are helpful? Which are not?*
- *How might I appropriate the ancient language of purity, single-heartedness, wholeness, or integrity in a manner that has meaning to my own life and context?*
- *"Follow the Lamb" (Augustine). In what ways do I regard celibacy as something I share with Jesus? How might it be the source of identification with him? Of intimacy with him?*
- *Where do I feel the tensions between a desire to give myself freely to God and a resistance to such self-offering? Do I bring that tension to God in prayer?*
- *In what ways may Christ's self-offering in the Eucharist inform my own self-understanding as a celibate?*
- *"Could any of [us] achieve it by [our] own strength?" (Augustine). What are the moments and occasions when I have felt the grace or gift enabling me to be celibate? What is the distinct history of this particular grace in my life?*

Resurrection of the Body and Life of the World to Come

And every word and cry of every tongue
Must form the Word that calls the darkest dark
Of this world to its lasting dawn. Toward
That rising hour we bear our single hearts . . .

— Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths* 2004[80]

It would be a terrible mistake to conclude a discussion of religious chastity with the image of sacrifice. If our experience as celibates were nothing but that of holocaust, we would soon be empty men. As the Irish poet W. B. Yeats wrote nearly a century ago, "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart."[81]

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[80] Wendell Berry, *Given* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2005), 145. Reprinted by permission of Counterpoint.

[81] W. B. Yeats, "Easter, 1916," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 180.

Not long ago I was at a monastery of Cistercian women. It was the feast of Aloysius Gonzaga, and the sisters wished me a happy Jesuit feast day. I wryly complained that the "boy saint" did not know the difficulties of religious life through the middle- and old-age years. At that point, one of the wise older sisters (who I know had her own struggles) leaned over and whispered into my ear, "Yes, Michael, but throughout these years God has given you many graces too, no?" Indeed, she was right, and I immediately recognized it. Like most Jesuits, I have felt exceedingly blessed at the hosts of wonderful people I have met in this life. Moreover, I have often listened to my brothers recount that when they reflect on their life, it is patent how prodigal God has been in giving them such satisfying love and life where they had not necessarily expected it. Our struggles, our aloneness notwithstanding, we also move within an orbit of grace that can easily be taken for granted. And if we consistently open ourselves to that grace, we can be transformed. Donald Cozzens speaks of an Ursuline sister who he knew beyond doubt had the gift of celibacy. Sister Kilian demonstrated a "freedom of soul" that put others at ease in her company. "She was a woman at peace with herself. Like healthy, integrated celibates, she welcomed others without judgment and those who came into the circle of her presence were touched by the ease and peace she radiated."[82]

Among the wonderful people I have met, I count many Jesuits who reflect the same kind of grace as Sister Kilian exhibited, even though I know most have struggled. For me, Augustine's vision of Continence in book 8 of the *Confessions* represents such people. Some scholars have found in this figure a nonsexual, feminine idealization that contrasts with Augustine's former flesh-and-blood mistresses.[83] But to anyone who has encountered the kind of integrated, flesh-and-blood celibate that Cozzens describes, Augustine's figure of Continence cannot be reduced to a pale shadow. She is calm and cheerful in manner, extending kindly hands to welcome and embrace, and she offers to Augustine "a wealth of heartening examples" of those who live a life of celibacy with happiness and integrity. Augustine remarks, "In all of them I saw that this same Continence was by no means sterile, but the fruitful mother of children" (*Conf.* 8.11.26).

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[82] Cozzens, *Freeing Celibacy,* 26–27.

[83] See, for example, Virginia Burrus, Mark D. Jordan, and Karmen MacKendrick, *Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confession* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 56: "She is the space into which a finally orthodox reader's pleasure is directed without fear of its escape into bodily ecstasy."

What the psychologist Erik Erikson called "generativity" is a theme we find, in a variety of forms, throughout ascetic literature.[84] Leaders of women's communities were frequently called "mother" and possessed unusual authority for the time.[85] The great Macrina, sister of Basil of Caesarea, forms a large monastic community of women and is called not only "mother" but also "father" and "teacher."[86] She heals those who come to her. So central was she to the well-being of her community that when she died, the virgins lamented "the light of our eyes is extinguished, the lamp guiding our path of our souls is gone."[87] Saddest of all were those who knew her as mother and nurse, those children abandoned by their parents along the roadside. Macrina had rescued them, nursed them, and brought them up.[88] Ambrose notes that the wombs of consecrated virgins are not simply sterile. They are most open because of their integrity. "Listen more carefully, O virgin, with open ears. From your enclosed chastity, open your hands, so that the poor may know you."[89]

This unique form of spiritual direction intends to teach the younger man interior freedom, but it is in the exchange with the elder that the "word of salvation" is generated.

For men, the generative component more frequently assumes the form of teaching and mentoring those who come to them. We have already seen just how eager Augustine was to learn from Ambrose. Perhaps the formulaic practice of the desert monks, however, provides a paradigm of "spiritual paternity." A young person comes to one of the fathers to ask, "Abba, give me a word, that I may be saved." Whereup-

[84] Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 266–68.

[85] See Susanna Elm, *"Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 55.

[86] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Saint Macrina,* 972C.

[87] Ibid., 988A.

[88] Ibid., 988B.

[89] Ambrose, *De institute virginis,* 9.58: "Audi, virgo, diligentius apertis auribus, et clauso pudore, aperi manus, ut te pauper agnoscat." On the growing call on ascetic communities to take care of the poor, see Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Brandeis University Press, 2002), 36–37. Under Basil "Monks were not to retreat into the wilderness as asocial hermits or as wandering charismatic groups. Rather, they were to take care of the poor and, by the example of their own poverty, to spur the rich to greater giving."

on the elder will offer a bit of advice, issue some practical command, or even refuse to say anything. The sayings have been described as "a flash of a signaling lamp—brief, arresting, and intense."[90] Macarius the Egyptian, for instance, tells a disciple to go to the cemetery and insult the dead. When the young monk returns and reports that nothing happened, Macarius tells him to go back tomorrow and praise them. The youth does so, but when that too evokes no response, Macarius advises, "Like the dead, take no account of either the scorn of men or their praises, and you can be saved."[91]

This unique form of spiritual direction intends to teach the younger man interior freedom, but it is in the exchange with the elder that the "word of salvation" is generated. As William Harmless rightly notes, "It was a 'word' for *this* monk on *this* occasion, a key specially fitted to unlock a particular heart."[92] The generative power of the word derives not only from the father's having lived the life over time with great prayer and attention but from a real understanding and care for the individual who comes to him. If the elders have considerable spiritual authority and at times show a gruff exterior, they also betray great tenderness toward a protégé—one that reflects the tenderness of God.[93] In a letter that Barsanuphius of Gaza writes to the younger John, for instance, the spiritual father encourages his friend to stay strong and remember everything he had formerly taught. "Therefore, brother, hold my hand and walk in the 'straight and narrow way that leads to life' eternal (Matt. 7:14) in our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom is the glory to the ages. Amen."[94]

Our present body, which is the site of many joys and pleasures but also of illness, injury, decay and ultimately death, shall be refashioned in ways surpassing anything we can imagine.

[90] Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church,* 12.

[91] *Sayings,* Macarius 23 (Ward, 132).

[92] William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 172.

[93] See Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 287–91.

[94] *Ep.* 22.31. In *Letters from the Desert: Barsanuphius and John,* trans. John Chryssavgis (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 68. For a recent discussion of "spiritual authority" in early Christianity, see Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiq-*

Many Jesuits, I suspect, can relate to the kind of satisfaction reflected in the exchange between the ancient abbas and those who came to them. When we are at our best, our love for the people we know and serve may be received as an intervention of God's love for them. Even in a "secular age," with its many suspicions about us, people do experience the love of celibates as healing and encouraging. We hope that such an experience is a sign of God's reign breaking into the world. For us it is frequently the occasion of deep personal joy, but also it is one way that we cherish, nurture, and tend the life of the world to come. The horizon of that life, however, extends beyond the practical, physical concerns of those we care for, the institutions we build, the good deeds we do. All these, as we know too well, will return to dust. Barsanuphius, as others, lived in hope and pointed others toward eternal life in Christ who is the "glory of ages."

A key theme of ancient ascetic literature was the correspondence between the practice of celibacy and anticipation of the bodily resurrection. Against a radical dualism that regarded salvation as the release of an immortal soul from the body, representatives of the patristic tradition strongly guarded the Pauline notion of resurrection as involving a new mode of physicality. Transformation into this mode can begin in this life, however, and the relics of the martyrs as well as the bodies of ascetics are often seen as providing a kind of window into a future state.[95] For Chrysostom, virginity demonstrated that "the things of the resurrection stand at the door."[96] The body of the ascetic was an unfinished block that willingly accepted "the deep chisel-bites" of renunciation so as to "take on the lineaments of the risen Christ."[97]

N. T. Wright has recently noted just how this foundational Christian belief has fallen into practical desuetude and how often in pastoral situations we fall into the same dualism we frequently condemn.[98] What

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uity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition (University of California Press, 2005), 56–99.

[95] See the brilliant work of Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (Columbia University Press, 1995), esp. 59–114, "Resurrection, Relic, Cult, and Asceticism."

[96] John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 73.1.6.

[97] Peter Brown, *Body and Society,* 442.

[98] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). A fuller, more scholarly argument is

possibly can we mean by a resurrection body, raised "incorruptible, glorious, powerful, spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:42–44)? And what possible link can we draw between that body and our own celibacy?

Wright asserts that in the Pauline understanding the "spiritual body" must refer to a quality of future existence where God definitively reanimates the world and all persons in it with the divine breath that hovered over chaos in the beginning. It is the same breath with which the Risen Jesus re-created his frightened, broken disciples in the upper room into men and women of immense courage. Our present body, which is the site of many joys and pleasures but also of illness, injury, decay, and ultimately death, shall be refashioned in ways surpassing anything we can imagine.[99] But this change is not merely the replacing of the old with new, improved parts, but a radical transformation, where God's energizing, creative power becomes the dynamic source that directly animates us. Hope in the bodily resurrection includes the belief that "what is done in the present in the body, by the power of the Spirit, will be reaffirmed in the eventual future, in ways at which we can presently only guess."[100]

For patristic writers such as Augustine, reflection on the bodily resurrection led to some of the most florid speculations in the history of theology. What, for instance, became of those who were eaten by fish, beasts, or cannibals?[101] Medieval theologians continued to ask such questions. And in religious art of the period—such as the eleventh-century mosaic of the Resurrection that we find in Torcelo, outside of Venice—we behold fantastic representations of what this "resurrection of the body" must mean. Angels call back to life those who had lost their lives at sea; fish are spitting out humans they had eaten; lions vomit forth those martyrs who had died in Roman persecution; hyenas regurgitate the odd and unlucky desert ascetic.

I have often wondered what motivated our fellow Christians to expend such energy on these theological speculations and freakish artis-

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found in N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

[99] Ibid., 147–63.

[100] Ibid., 156.

[101] The most accessible discussion is *City of God* 22.20. Again, see the expansive discussion of Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 59–114, together with the pictures following that section.

tic renderings. My proposed answer is this: basic anxiety about change, experienced pain of bodily disintegration, anguish over the reality of personal, social, and cultural loss, death, and the countless ways we experience personal disruption. What loss could be more total than being eaten by a beast? What fate more terrible than being the dinner of cannibals?

It is easy to laugh dismissively at what may be, to our artistic and religious tastes, grotesque. Our resistance to imagining whatever this "glorified body" is may suggest we are more dualistic in our thinking than we care to admit. But I like to think about those who lived more closely to such dramatic images of bodily resurrection than we do. What was the effect of such images on their spiritual lives? I like to think that they could say to themselves, "If I can imagine God restoring to integrity what has suffered unimaginable disruption, I have radical reason to hope through all the disruptions I endure."

A hope that God will restore and transform what is lost and broken and empty is a radical hope indeed. Moreover, it is a kind of hope that the world, with its own particular darkness, badly needs.

It was such radical and total hope in Christ that made Ignatius of Antioch plead in the famous words:

> Let me be the food of wild beasts. . . . I am the wheat of God, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread. . . . Fire and cross . . . the wrenching of bones, the mangling of limbs, the grinding of my whole body, evil punishments of the devil—let these come upon me, only that I may attain Jesus Christ.[102]

Moreover, it was such passionate commitment and radical trust that moved the young Iñigo centuries later to adopt the name of this second-century martyr and gather companions who took the name of Jesus.

A hope that God will restore and transform what is lost and broken and empty is a radical hope indeed. Moreover, it is a kind of hope that the world, with its own particular darkness, badly needs. If the strange images of reconstitution are less prevalent in our times, they

[102] Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 4.1.

nonetheless challenge us to wonder, then, what eye has not seen or ear heard or heart conceived. It invites us to wonder what God has ready for those who love him.

And it may be that in our own way we celibates—open, trusting, loving, yet also fragile and alone—are called to provide icons of hope. It may be that we, who have such deep physical and spiritual longings and vulnerabilities, are called through our commitment to be signs of trust and encouragement to others that Christ will indeed "raise up our mortal bodies and make them like his own in glory."

In a way, our choice to make a vow of chastity and to live it out may beggar the imagination of our contemporaries as the images of bodily resurrection challenge us. Life, we believe, shall actually be restored when all seems lost. Love, we believe, is actually possible apart from a spouse. And even what we call "immortality," we believe, shall be given without our passing on our DNA to later generations.

It's an amazing thing to believe in, if you really think about it. And certainly it's a cause of wonder to many. I like to think, though, that our celibacy, when lived well and as a free act of faith, hope, and love, may encourage others as they struggle to believe in the life of the world to come.

Reflection Questions

- *What experiences of generativity have given me joy and consolation as a celibate? Do I feel as though I am contributing to the "life of the world to come" that God is bringing about?*
- *How has teaching, mentoring, pastoring, counseling, spiritual direction, been an occasion of "spiritual paternity"? To what extent have I been engaged in the ancient fathers' practice of generating the "word of salvation" that is fit for concrete people and particular hearts?*
- *How does hope in the resurrection function in my own life of faith? In my vocation? In my experience as a celibate?*
- *In what ways might my encounter with the Risen Jesus encourage me? Invite me to trust more deeply in his Father? Look for the work of his regenerating Spirit?*
- *What do I make of the Christian concept of the "resurrected body"? How does it inform my understanding of salvation? How might*

it offer images of hope in the face of radical disruption? How does such hope give meaning to my celibacy?

- *How might I imagine a well-lived celibacy as an "icon of hope" to the world?*

IV. Afterword

At the beginning of this essay, I indicated that the answer to the question "why celibacy?" must be God. Moreover, since God is not an object that can be contained, the answer will always elude us.

But that, again, is somewhat the point. Finally, we are left free to make acts of faith, hope, and love. The decision to make or to keep a vow of chastity—as one such act—derives from a freedom that grounds the life of faith itself. Few people are convinced through argument to believe in God. Rather, we are, for the most part, mysteriously called, and it is left to us whether to follow or not.

If the "why?" of celibacy will always elude us, so too will its meaning. And that, again, may be regarded as a function of our freedom. In the ancient tradition there was no one explanation of celibacy. As I have tried to show, there were various frames wherein it could be said to have meaning. Our ancient forebears had to make it meaningful with their own lives, and so, I would suggest, do we.

As we do that, however, we find again and again that God surprises us. God, as the saying goes, is always greater: *Deus semper major*. As we move toward the infinite horizon, we remember Jesus' promise that we shall be given an unimaginable hundredfold in the age to come. How that shall be, what form it may take will always be beyond what we can imagine. It will be "qualitatively different." We must then have the courage to continue letting go of the familiar, safe moorings so as to entrust ourselves to him again.

At the beginning of the essay I also offered the image of the deathbed as an initial point of focus for considering celibacy. It is appropriate to return to this image again. In fact, while I was working on an early draft of this paper, I was part of a team of people accompanying a brother Jesuit who was dying from an aggressive form of cancer. Paul Locatelli, S.J., as a university president of twenty years, was a man who knew and enjoyed power, though in the end he was radically dispossessed.

To me, Paul was a generous patron and older brother whom I loved sincerely and miss terribly. But on his deathbed—vulnerable in ways he had never experienced before and afraid as he could sometimes feel as night closed in—he unknowingly taught me something essential. As someone approaching death, Paul was alone in a way that could not be denied or mitigated. But he also felt loved with an intensity that I suspect he had never known before. Though he had no spouse or children, we, the members of his natural and religious families, stayed with him to the end. It did not eliminate his aloneness, but it shifted its meaning.

And that's the lesson. Like everyone else, we celibates are, in very deep ways, always alone. There is an iconic quality to our aloneness, and at times it can feel crushing. But we are not alone in being alone. Although we may always be tempted to withdraw personally from others and face new pressures to live increasingly privatized lives, at our best we are still profoundly connected. We witness in each other the doing of our celibacy—quietly, humbly, imperfectly, courageously. Slowly, mysteriously, sometimes painfully we encounter ourselves within the larger Body of Christ—fragile now but still groaning for our redemption and glorious transformation when all days have come to an end.

In the meantime we need to encourage each other daily, as Hebrews says, "while it is still today" (Heb. 3:13).

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