

Embracing Absence: A Trinitarian Spirituality of Consecrated Celibacy

In his letter for the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis invites religious to “live the mysticism of encounter...live in the light of the loving relationships of the three divine Persons.”¹ Lived mysticism suggests a spirituality. Since religious life “expresses in a particularly vivid way the Trinitarian nature of Christian life and it anticipates in a certain way that eschatological fulfillment towards which the whole Church is tending,”² a spirituality of the evangelical counsels would have Trinitarian and eschatological dimensions.

I propose that in this Year of Consecrated Life, religious try to develop a Trinitarian spirituality of the evangelical counsels, not as a way to better understand their function, but to appropriate our *lived experience* of them.

While all of the vows are experienced in unique and challenging ways, I believe that consecrated celibacy presents the most significant challenge at the affective and existential levels of our humanity. After all, intimate sexual relations are not “purely biological, but [it] concerns the innermost being of the human person as such.”³ Thus, consecrated celibacy touches us at our “innermost being” and understood within a Trinitarian and eschatological framework leaves us yearning for something that will not be fulfilled in this life.

Consecrated Celibacy: A Challenge from Within

Certain challenges to living consecrated celibacy will remain in every era: psychosexual immaturity, a lack of commitment, poor community life, etc. However, three contemporary factors affect our experience and understanding of chastity.

First, we live in a hyper-sexualized society. Excessive concern and indulgence in forms of sexual expression is evidenced in advertising, on the internet, and in increased numbers of sexual addictions.

Second, living consecrated celibacy requires a certain quality of community life. As religious communities diminish in number and become more fragile, we must ask how they will be able to support healthy chastity. This is particularly relevant for younger religious who may find themselves alone in their age group in their community. In the past a significant number of the same generation made friendships more common within the community. Today, peers will naturally be sought outside of the community. The intimacy of friendship is central to living celibacy in a healthy manner.

Third, traditional theologies of consecrated celibacy are no longer tenable when considered alongside the positive view of human sexuality espoused by the Church since Vatican II. In the past, it was easier to make sense of consecrated celibacy in a theological context that denigrated the body and viewed sexual relations, even within marriage, as a remedy to concupiscence. Today the Church affirms the dignity of sexuality and sexualized intimacy as central to human flourishing.

¹ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life 2*

² *Vita Consecrata* 14

³ *Familiaris consortio* 11

Consecrated celibacy does not oppose a positive understanding of intimate sexual relations within a covenantal relationship. Instead, consecrated celibacy highlights the value of such relations by a contrast of absence. Consecrated celibacy is the absence of intimate sexual relations. No other activity whether ministry or prayer can substitute for this constitutive aspect of human living when it is lacking. Thus, consecrated celibacy contrasts covenanted sexual relations as white does colour. The absence of sexual intimacy highlights the profound goodness and value of sexual intimacy just as white, the absence of colour, highlights any colour placed beside it.

Longing for the Father⁴: Experience of Absence

The late Jesuit Fred Crowe proposes a spirituality derived from our experience of the Triune God. The Son was experienced immediately by those who heard him, touched him, and saw him – his family, friends, and disciples. He is now experienced vicariously by the power of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the Church.

Our experience of the Holy Spirit is immediate; it is the experience of God's love that floods our hearts. But our experience of the Father is the absence of experience: "It is the absence, the lack, the need, the hunger, the emptiness, the longing, the abandonment experienced in our human condition as long as we are separated from the presence of the Father in our world."⁵ This experience of the absence of Father endures until our final eschatological union with God. Neither the experience of the Son nor of the Spirit can substitute for the lack of experience of the Father.

The absence experienced in consecrated celibacy is not valuable or useful in itself. The experience points to something beyond it, to its own eschatological fulfillment of union with God. Intimate sexual relations also point to divine union but as a foretaste. Thus, both sexual union and consecrated celibacy point to final union, but in radically different ways. The experience of absence is an orientation to the ineffable mystery of God's presence in the world and our human longing to participate ever more fully in the divine life.

Christian mystics speak of the experience of absence as a hallmark of the experience of God. This absence leaves us longing for a fulfillment that can never be satisfied in this world. Mystics often used erotically charged language and intimate sexual imagery to express the dual experience of absence and longing in their relationship with God.

Conclusion

A Trinitarian spirituality of consecrated celibacy acknowledges the future oriented dimension of celibacy by adverting to its lived experience. Too often theological reflection on consecrated celibacy moves to a functional mode: chastity frees religious for service or self-gift to God.⁶ A healthy spirituality begins by appropriating our lived experience of consecrated celibacy and talking about this experience in mature ways before trying to rationalize, spiritualize or functionalize the vow.

⁴ For the sake of brevity and ease I am not using gender inclusive language to refer to the first person of the Trinity.

⁵ Fred Crowe, "Rethinking God-with-us," in *Lonerger and the Level of Our Time*, ed. Michael Vertin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) 343.

⁶ See for examples *Perfectae Caritatis* 12, *Familiaris consortio* 16, or Sandra M. Schneiders, *Seeing All, Religious Life in a New Millennium*, vol. 2 (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press 2001) 406.

If sexuality and intimacy are fundamental to what it means to be human, consecrated celibacy purposely leaves an absence in our humanity and points to the more to come when, through the missions of the Son and the Spirit, we are brought into a deep intimate union with the Father. Until that time, the experience of absence plunges religious into mystery and longing.

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