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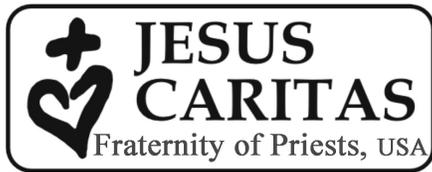
Formation for Embracing Celibacy

by Father Gerald Coleman, SS

*"As bishops, vocation directors and seminary personnel, we must be clear about the formational demand of chastity and celibacy, and in fact we must be more demanding than perhaps ever before," Sulpician Father Gerald Coleman, president and rector of St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, California, said in an address October 4 to the Midwestern Association of Theological Schools meeting at the Chicago Marriott, Schaumburg, 111. "The future priest is required to be ready (prepared) to live as a single person forever and to do this joyfully in service of God and his fellowmen and women," Coleman said. He added: "Being unmarried is only part of the picture, however, as he is also obligated to live life free from sins against chastity. It is a rather startling fact that many priests in the recent sexual abuse scandals did not perceive their activities as offenses and sins against their commitment to celibacy." Candidates for the priesthood "should have attained in some measure 'growth in the four pillars or integrated dimensions of formation' " that *Pastores Dabo Vobis* identifies: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral, said Coleman, and "if a seminarian is to integrate these characteristics, his formators must make sure that he does not think of the four pillars as unconnected columns." The candidate's celibacy preparation must begin before he is accepted to a formation program, said Coleman. After admission, he said, "the principle of gradualism is the guiding light... Seminary formators must foster a consistent move through the four pillars so that a seminarian gradually but resolutely incorporates the values of chaste celibacy through instruction, personal reflection, community life, advising and mentoring, spiritual direction, psychological counseling and a deep commitment to prayer and the celebration of the eucharist."*

Asking what a healthy celibate looks like, Coleman mentioned eight characteristics. For example, this person "realizes both his strengths and vulnerabilities in terms of his celibate commitment" and "has adequately grieved what he must leave behind." Asking what a healthy celibate avoids and counteracts, Coleman mentioned six points. For example, this person "does not affiliate with groups that promote a lifestyle or behavior incompatible with a chaste celibate commitment"; he does not expect others to declare or disclose their sexual orientation nor does he have any compulsion in this regard." Coleman's text follows.

The revised ordination rite for deacons states, Those of you who are prepared to embrace the celibate state: Do you resolve to keep forever this commitment as a sign of your dedication to Christ the Lord for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, in service of God and man?"¹ The basic presuppositions of this question are clear: (1) you are prepared; (2) you are to embrace the celibate state; (3) you are to do this forever; (4) as a sign of your dedication to Christ; and (5) for the purpose of service. Citing *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (1965), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further details this resolve:



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"Called to concentrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to 'the affairs of the Lord,' they give themselves entirely to God and to men. Celibacy is a sign of this new life to the service of which the church's minister is consecrated; accepted with a joyous heart celibacy radiantly proclaims the reign of God" (No. 1579).

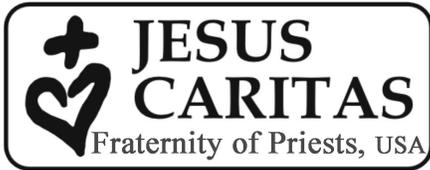
Clearly, the embracing of the celibate state is an extraordinary demand, thus making the period of priestly formation critical in terms of both internal and external preparation and integration. In *A People Adrift*,² New York Times senior religion correspondent Peter Steinfels cites 1 Corinthians 14:8, "If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for battle?" and concludes that "only a well-defined priesthood will draw young men" and "only a heroic way of life, as defined by celibacy, will draw outstanding young men." He calls for what athletes name execution, what musicians and dancers name performance and what Cardinal Danneels of Brussels describes as craftsmanship: that is, "energy" that empowers the priest to live an authentically - indeed, heroically - celibate life. The resolve to celibacy is, then, "exceptional" and suggests a threefold framework for an authentic schooling:

First, in his 1986 landmark book *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*,³ psychiatrist Peter Rutter warns that no matter how well professionals have prepared themselves through education, training and experience, their ability to resist temptations against celibacy arises only from a capacity to recognize the harm done to themselves and others when the celibate commitment is transgressed. Consequently, intellectual training is not sufficient in preparing a seminarian to live celibately. Personal and deepening formation and integration must accompany academic understanding, especially when this commitment carries the enjoinder to live celibately with a "joyous heart," which evidences a radiant proclamation of one's life.

Second, novelist Rumer Godden⁴ counsels that "everyone is a house with four rooms: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Unless we go into every room, every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not a complete person." Formation in celibacy demands, then, personal integration in all four rooms. Award-winning religion writer David Gibson puts it this way: "Priests are indelibly stamped by ordination; they are not supposed to harbor doubts, but rather to be steady guides who shore up the shaky faith of others."⁵

Third, Steinfels challenges the priest to be "distinguished": that is, to be men of "learning, service, spiritual wisdom and charity." He readily admits that parishioners "feel that anything but a priest in the pulpit on Sunday or at their mother's wake, their daughter's wedding, their grandson's baptism, their devotional group's planning session or the adult Bible study is second best."⁶ This same note is sounded in Stephen Rossetti's recent address to a convocation of priests of the Archdiocese of the military services:

"When he leads the people as presider of the eucharist, when he anoints and reconciles, it is Christ himself who is acting through the priest. If there is a decline in priestly vocations today in some countries, it may be that we have forgotten the critical place of the priest for the people of God."⁷

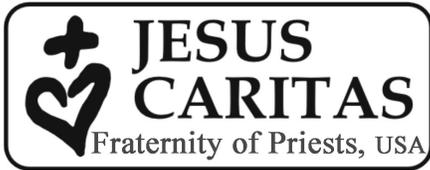


Bishops and seminary formators surely face an overwhelming formational task, one that demands very careful pedagogy. There is a story in the Talmud about a traveler who asks a child, "Is there a shortcut to such-and-such village?" The child answers, "There is a shortcut that is long and a long way that is short."⁸ When we take shortcuts, we probably end up regretting it. Careful celibate formation needs time. When the Israelites left Egypt, God did not lead them on the most direct route precisely because it was short. They needed extra time to make the transition from having been slaves to being free people.⁹

Almost identical to Godden's image, the proposed fifth edition of the *Program of Priestly Formation* indicates that priestly candidates should have attained in some measure "growth in the four pillars or integrated dimensions of formation identified in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral" (p. 12, sec. 1-3). This document wisely looks at these pillars as "thresholds" or "foundations" where the "principle of gradualism" demands a clear demonstration that the seminarian is growing and developing in maturity at "a progressively higher level" as one approaches ordination (p. 12, sec. 32-41). This *Program of Priestly Formation* draft outlines certain essential criteria whereby a seminarian can be judged to be growing in these four necessary dimensions of priestly formation:

- He understands personal growth and integration not in a secular sense of a career, but rather as cooperation with the grace of God. He needs to cross the threshold of having a career to sustaining a vocation (p. 17, sec. 4-6).
- He is a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ. By vocation, he is a man of communion who demonstrates qualities of effective communication, prudence, affective maturity in body and soul; in other words, he is free to be a public person who possesses as solid moral character (pp. 17-20).
- He is a man who has acquired intellectual and pastoral skills, but for the singular purpose of acting and standing for Christ (p. 47, sec. 5-8).

If a seminarian is to integrate these characteristics, his formators must make sure that he does not think of the four pillars as unconnected columns. The strength of this four-pillared image is its clarity about foundations. Its possible weakness might be the impression that pillars are not framed in such a fashion that weakness in one inevitably creates frailty in others. In terms of the resolve for celibacy, the *Program of Priestly Foundation* draft hits the mark: the various dimensions of being a whole person (i.e., human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral) converge in human sexuality (p. 19, sec. 13-18). The "Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person" (No. 2332). In his formation for celibacy, the future priest is required to be ready (prepared) to live as a single person forever and to do this joyfully in service of God and his fellow men and women. Being unmarried is only part of the picture, however, as he is also obligated to live a life free from sins against chastity.¹⁰ It is a rather startling fact that many priests in the recent sexual abuse scandals did not perceive their activities as offenses and sins against their commitment to celibacy. Priestly sexual abuse of children, for example, is



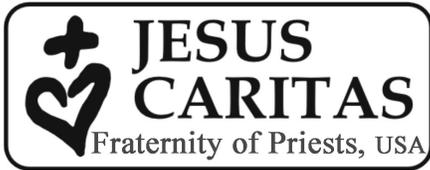
not only illegal, but it is also sinful. One's resolve for celibacy has been violated. How do bishops, vocation directors and seminary formators assist a seminarian to embrace a celibate life prepared, joyful and free?"¹¹

First, this assistance and preparation must begin before a candidate is accepted to a formation program. In the process of diocesan and religious acceptance procedures, a candidate must be judged as having the ability to live celibately by a careful discernment of his past life and lifestyle, and a sexual history which demonstrates that he possesses a capacity for freely living a chaste and celibate life.¹² What "signs" should be evident by personal interviews, letters of recommendation, psychological assessment? The inquirer can move from candidacy to acceptance when judgements are made that this man has the qualities for intimacy, friendship, charity and generosity.¹³ These initial assessments must conclude that this man bears a steady integration of his emotions and his sexuality, manifested in emotional stability, personal integrity and spiritual enthusiasm.¹⁴

These factors are expressed clearly in Canon 241: "The diocesan bishop is to admit to the major seminary only those who are judged capable of dedicating themselves permanently to the sacred ministries in light of their human, moral, spiritual and intellectual characteristics, their physical health and their proper motivation." In the process of admission, therefore, one is looking for behavioral and characterological standards. Once admission has occurred, from pre-theology through ordination and into priesthood, the principle of gradualism is the guiding light. The *Program of Priestly Formation* draft puts it this way: "A progressively high level of expectations is to be sought as the applicant seeks admission to the various levels of preparation, moving from the preparatory to the collegiate and to pre-theologate and finally to the theologate level program," (p. 12, sec. 24-31 and p. 69, sec. 6-35). Seminary formators must foster a consistent move through the four pillars so that a seminarian gradually but resolutely incorporates the values of chaste celibacy through instruction, personal reflection, community life, advising and mentoring, spiritual direction, psychological counseling and a deep commitment to prayer and the celebration of the eucharist (pp. 20-21). Intensive workshops and seminars are also helpful, but only if they enhance and focus the whole formation program, and not act as its substitute.¹⁵

What does a healthy celibate look like? No two are the same, of course, but certain similarities can be noted. First of all, a healthy seminarian laughs. He's not silly or capricious but sustains a human balance that knows that not everything or everyone is perfect, including himself. This man is self-possessed, a person of integrity and holiness, and clearly manifests certain qualities:

- He is at peace with himself and his sexuality: He has accomplished what the catechism asks
- he acknowledges and accepts his sexual identity (No. 2332).
- He realizes both his strengths and vulnerabilities in terms of his celibate commitment.

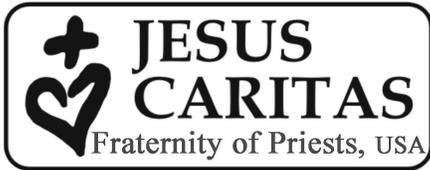


- He possesses an internal knowledge of human sexuality, and his own sexuality, and lives a life evidenced by healthy friendships with men and women.
- He sustains a capacity for intimacy by his ability to personally relate to others truthfully, respecting proper sexual boundaries.
- He has adequately grieved what he must leave behind embracing a celibate lifestyle.¹⁶
- He evidences an aptitude for detachment, emotionally distancing himself from sexual temptations and sexualized atmospheres.
- He shows no need to use others for his own sexual aggrandizement.

What does a healthy celibate avoid and counteract?

- He does not identify with a sexually permissive culture, seductive conduct and dress, romantic liaisons or dating, genital intercourse or sexually permissive relationships.¹⁷
- He does not affiliate with groups that promote a lifestyle or behavior incompatible with a chaste celibate commitment.
- He does not expect others to declare or disclose their sexual orientation nor does he have any compulsion in this regard.
- He avoids telling sexual jokes or making prejudicial comments that contradict his commitment to celibacy.
- He does not make use of sexually explicit materials and avoids all use of the Internet which displays and welcomes sexually overt interaction and entertainment. These are all forms of moral narcissism, which foster a type of reductionism which diminishes persons to sexual objects.
- He does not participate in inappropriate or exclusive relationships, or engage in physical expressions of intimacy that properly belong in the context of marriage. In *Jesus and Virtue Ethics*,¹⁶ Jesuits Daniel Harrington and James Keenan demonstrate that for nearly 15 centuries in biblical, ascetical and moral theology, Christians understood their lives to be divided into three stages: the beginners (avoid sin, don't fall out of grace and if you do sin, confess and amend your life), the proficient (grow in a deeper experience of the discipleship through ascetical and devotiona practices) and the perfect (be contemplative and mystical).

Harrington and Keenan describe these stages as "subdue, submit and submerge!" This is not the way of gradualism wherein the priestly candidate is developing an interrelationship within and among his human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral self. He is not moving laterally, but



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vertically. His life shows an ever-deepening rootedness in personal integrity and sexual wholeness.

In the extraordinary letters between St. Therese of Lisieux and seminarian Maurice Barthelemy, she never allowed him to become victim of his "many falls" and "unheard-of blunders".¹⁹ Growth and maturity in his sexual failings did not come about by a cycle of sin, confession and more sin. Sister Therese challenged him to face his human shortcomings and learn from them. He would become a better priest, she counseled, if he learned and grew from his humiliations. She constantly pushed him to higher standards on every level of his being. Maurice was probably not a great man, but he certainly became a good man. Should seminary formators not learn from this pedagogy by an ever more challenging posture in helping seminarians to ready themselves in their resolve for celibacy? Of course, challenge and encouragement must also be truthful and discerning: Some men cannot live celibately and must be led to the judgement to leave a priestly formation program. A tree planted in the desert will ultimately dry up and wither because it has no source of replenishment outside itself. Maturation in celibacy demands a profound interior commitment, but one coupled with the constant need for restoration and replenishment from somewhere other than oneself - from God and from people inspired by God. What we need today, Rossetti has claimed, is "perspective and vision."²⁰ As bishops, vocation directors and seminary personnel, we must be clear about the formational demand of chastity and celibacy, and in fact we must be more demanding than perhaps ever before. Our formational perspectives must be apparent and unambiguous. Only the brave-hearted and graced man will make a good priest. We should not settle for anything less.