



VATICAN - WORDS OF DOCTRINE Rev Nicola Bux and Rev. Salvatore Vitiello - Ecclesiastic Celibacy in the present-day secularised context

Vatican City (Fides Service) - The sad case of African Bishop Milingo reopened the controversial question of marriage for priests, perhaps updated as an opportunity or convenience to avoid cases of paedophilia and homosexuality. Apart from the fact that this would be a return to the vituperated idea of matrimony as “remedium concupiscentiae”, first of all we must avoid getting round the words of the Lord: «If you wish to be perfect, leave all you have, and follow me».

This is, so to say, the “Christica vivendi forma” the Lord Jesus proposed to His disciples who became obedient, poor and chaste to follow him. This is why the celibacy of bishops, priests and deacons goes under the title “Apostolica vivendi forma”. We willingly refer to a meditation by Mgr. Mario Marini, *Il Celibato Sacerdotale «Apostolica Vivendi Forma»*, who quotes Benedict XVI and John Paul II (ed. Cantagalli, Siena 2005).

The first thing to say is that priestly celibacy cannot be separated from the other two evangelical counsels poverty and obedience. Nor may it be objected that the promise of celibacy is not a vow of chastity. Looking at the lives of the saints, starting with those who were married, the paradox is precisely this: for those who follow Jesus Christ totally, it is difficult to separate the ‘percentages’ of chastity, poverty and obedience, interwoven in this discipleship. Living no longer for oneself but for the Lord implies the offering of the body in living sacrifice (chastity), of all goods (poverty), the will (obedience). These virtues can replace one another; obedience means poverty from the riches of one’s pride; being without goods means being obedient to one supreme God: being chaste means not possessing even oneself. Not rashly we might say that the three virtues which are also evangelical counsels can be summarised in that different «possession» of things, virginity, as St Paul says.

Let us take as an example the lives of Mr and Mrs Beltrame Quattrocchi, Luigi and Maria, beatified by John Paul II. They practiced the promise of obedience, above all in conjugal submission in matrimony, together with obedience to the Pope in the Church: a freely given obedience, above all, an act of love. Obedience starts and ends with God as a pure act of faith. Therefore faith is the criteria of judgement not adapted to a worldly or simply human mentality; through sacramental life and prayer, walking in the presence of God, becoming gradually assimilated to His will. This was their programme for life. Also the choice of a permanent spiritual father was clearly an expression of renunciation of self. Lastly, the life of the couple, lived in conjugal submission, becomes a competition in reciprocal obedience in charity.

Although Blessed Luigi and Maria were not born poor, they chose to become poor, above all inwardly, and appeared to be immersed in total renunciation, free of earthly possessions, rich only in Jesus. This led them to use and appreciate every thing without dissipation; with the joy proper to saints they espoused their dignity with poverty in a union which had its essential point in God.

From this flows chastity, virtue exercised heroically as the passage of I to You for whom one wishes good more than one’s own. As a married couple they maintained holiness and respect for the body. This led Blessed Luigi and Maria to consider purity a social virtue, possible for every individual. Furthermore they lived the family as the apex of their conjugal aspirations, handing on to their children their own sense of purity and love of God lived in the family community as a domestic shrine and church. This is a demonstration of the richness of grace in which both husband and wife lived the sacramental charisma of marriage. Therefore Maria and Luigi Corsini Beltrame Quattrocchi were exemplary Christian spouses also in chastity.

If lay people give such example in exercising the evangelical counsels, how much more can and must clerics do the same. First of all poverty must be lived as inward divestment expressed in detached use of material goods out of love and for the kingdom of heaven. We must give ourselves to Jesus, «putting our hand to the plough» means leaving the comfort and commodities of the family and falling in love with the poverty of Jesus and his sacrifice, for love of Him and of souls so that all men and women may encounter Him.

Obedience is a virtue to live by rejecting privileges, by cordial obedience to the bishop in communion with the Pope and to the Pope, who must always be obeyed in faith, as to Jesus Christ, as Ignatius of Antioch says in his famous call. Thirdly chastity: loving each and all with an undivided heart, with the same mystical attitude of Jesus Christ, spouse of the Church. The exercise of virginity must also look at the Blessed Virgin Mary invoked precisely as Queen of the Apostles. The defence of chastity demands mortification. However if our heart grows accustomed to being always totally with God, which is the virginal charisma, it will soon learn to give itself to others.

Celibacy and virginity are therefore 'martyrdom' or 'witness', as we are reminded by the monks who flourished in the early Church after the epoch of the martyrs: monarchism was seen as daily martyrdom. The priest precisely through his celibacy is a monk in his heart. In this way celibacy is exercised as a virtue and a vow, like a cross to carry. Celibacy must be reflected in the priest's quiet, modest and reserved manner; which also reveals the purity of his soul and his fidelity to virtue. All this can be summarised in "We humbly pray" with which the priest addresses the Lord in the anaphora. To close, celibacy is the mystical synthesis of sponsal communion which leads those who let themselves be drawn to Him, to life in unity with Christ. (Agenzia Fides 26/10/2006; righe 70, parole 1,020)