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VATICAN - WORDS OF DOCTRINE rev. Nicola Bux and rev. Salvatore Vitiello - Priestly celibacy, horizon of a greater love

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote in his «Report on the Faith» published in 1985 «A priest is always tempted to grow accustomed to greatness, making it a routine. Today he might feel the greatness of the Sacred as a burden, and desire (perhaps unconsciously) to be free of it, lowering to his own stature the Mystery, rather than entrusting himself to it with humility but also with confidence so as to be lifted up to that height» (p. 58).

Many times in history there have been attempts to question, perhaps on the pretext of human weakness, the vocation to the priesthood which the Catholic Church considers indissolubly linked to celibacy. It would suffice to refer to the official bulletins of the Congregation for the Clergy to demonstrate, statistics in hand that defections, unjustly emphasised by the media, constitute a negligible almost physiological percentage. On the contrary, since to sustain any novelty the authority of the Second Vatican Council is always invoked, one wonders that so many fail to ask why, in its labour of renewal, ecclesiastic celibacy was not touched in any way, indeed the Council clearly confirmed and supported it in the decree «Presbyterorum ordinis» n.17.

« Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth: it is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword. For I have come to set son against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law; a person's enemies will be the members of his own household. No one who prefers father or mother to me is worthy of me. No one who prefers son or daughter to me is worthy of me; […] Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it. 'Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me» (Mt 10,34-37;39-40). So, with regard to discipleship, the Lord Jesus announces that his followers will be persecuted even by members of their own family and he proposes at the same time himself, the Son of God who is love, as the centre of the affectivity and freedom of every human person.

Describing natural sentiments between human beings the Lord warns us: unless they are rooted in Him, these sentiments will run dry. Paradoxically if we place nothing between Him and relations with persons and things we obtain possession of everything. He is the salt which prevents affective relationships from corrosion: this is virginity of heart, or celibacy for the kingdom of heaven; this is love which neither wanes nor dies, but lasts for ever. In this sense celibacy is a deposit, a foretaste, of the condition of the Kingdom of God.

This is understood only by those to whom it is granted from on High. This is why Jesus proposed himself as the highest and most perfect model of God’s love which is Agape. Just as « Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage.» («Deus Caritas Est» 11) corresponding to Jesus unique Lord and Saviour is the celibate priest: sign of inexhaustible love with its roots in virginity, in the undivided heart.

This tending to perfection must exist also in marriage. It is not possible to really love husband or wife stopping at semblance which is only the sign of a mystery, of a greater and everlasting beauty. Therefore virginity or celibacy is a new possession which entails detachment, temporal renouncing which obtains here and now «a hundredfold and for eternity ».

Following Jesus means living with Him: the vocation is one. The ideal of celibacy cannot be reached without the experience of Christ as the fullness of the human. Both the consecration of priestly virginity and the indissolubility of marriage confirm the eternity of love and the truth that «for God nothing is impossible». Indeed, it is said that in a way priests with celibacy and spouses with conjugal fidelity are a reciprocal call to bear witness that reason and freedom are continually attracted by the beauty of chaste and fruitful love: for the former at the origin of spiritual generation of the multitude of children which is the Church, for the latter at the origin of a human family which is a small domestic Church.

Priestly celibacy like all of God’s gift is for the whole Church. Just as for married couples it is possible to

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be faithful thanks to the marriage bond, so too for priests it is possible to live celibacy thanks to the bond of intimate sacramental brotherhood as Paul VI recalls in his encyclical «Sacerdotalis coelibatus» (n. 8). The Synod of Bishops in 1971, the first after the institution of that body, confirmed celibacy as a great treasure in and for the mission of the Church in the wake of apostolic discipleship. If it is Christ who baptises when the priest baptises, if it is Christ who makes himself present when the priest pronounces the words over the bread and the wine, then the foundation of celibacy is Christ himself and his apostolic discipleship, from which readiness for pastoral service flows and takes form. Once and for all, were the Latin Chuch to renounce priestly celibacy she would gain nothing with regard to her witness to Christ or her mission in the world, or in the number of vocations, on the contrary she would lose much of her history and tradition and her profound identity. (Agenzia Fides 16/11/2006; righe 61, parole 807)

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