

Rolheiser: Celibacy – a personal apologia

As a vowed, religious celibate I'm very conscious that today celibacy, whether lived out in a religious commitment or in other circumstances, is suspect, under siege, and is offering too little by way of a helpful apologia to its critics.

Do I believe in the value of consecrated celibacy? The only real answer I can give must come from my own life.

What's my response to a culture that, for the most part, believes celibacy is both a naiveté and a dualism that stands against the goodness of sexuality, renders its adherents less than fully human, and lies at the root of the clerical sexual abuse crisis within the Roman Catholic Church? What might I say in its defense?

First, that celibacy isn't a basis for pedophilia? Virtually all empirical studies indicate that pedophilia is a diagnosis not linked to celibacy. But then let me acknowledge its downside: Celibacy is not the normal state for anyone. When God made the first man and woman, God said: "It is not good for the human being to be alone." That isn't just a statement about the constitutive place of community within our lives (though it is that); it's a clear reference to sexuality, its fundamental goodness, and its God-intended place in our lives. From that it flows that to be a celibate, particularly to choose to be one, comes fraught with real dangers.

Celibacy can, and sometimes does, lead to an unhealthy sense of one's sexual and relational self and to a coldness that's often judgmental. It can too, understandably, lead to an unhealthy sexual preoccupation within the celibate and it provides access to certain forms of intimacy within which a dangerous betrayal of trust can occur.

Less recognized, but a huge danger, is that it can be a vehicle for selfishness. Simply put, without the conscriptive demands that come with marriage and child-raising there's the ever-present danger that a celibate can, unconsciously, arrange his life too much to suit his own needs.

Thus celibacy is not for everyone; indeed it's not for the many. It contains an inherent abnormality. Consecrated celibacy is not simply a different lifestyle. It's anomalous, in terms of the unique sacrifice it asks of you, where, like Abraham going up the mountain to sacrifice Isaac, you're asked to sacrifice what's most precious to you. As Thomas Merton, speaking of his own celibacy, once said: *The absence of woman is a fault in my chastity*. But, for the celibate as for Abraham, that can have a rich purpose and contain its own potential for generativity.

As well, I believe that consecrated celibacy, like music or religion, needs to be judged by its best expressions and not by its aberrations. Celibacy should not be judged by those who have not given it a wholesome expression but by the many wonderful women and men, saints of the past and present, who have given it a wholesome and generative expression.

One could name numerous saints of the past or wonderfully healthy and generative persons from our own generation as examples where vowed celibacy has made for a wholesome, happy life that inspires others: Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier, Oscar Romero, Raymond E. Brown, and Helen Prejean, to name just a few.

Personally, I know many very generative, vowed celibates whose wholesomeness I envy and who make celibacy credible – and attractive.

Like marriage, though in a different way, celibacy offers a rich potential for intimacy and generativity. As a vowed celibate I am grateful for a vocation which has brought me intimately into the world of so many people.

When I left home at a young age to enter the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, I confess, I didn't want celibacy. Nobody should. I wanted to be a missionary and a priest and celibacy presented itself as the stumbling block. But once inside religious life, almost immediately, I loved the life, though not the celibacy part. Twice I delayed taking final vows, unsure about celibacy.

Eventually I made the decision, a hard leap of trust, and took the vow for life. Full disclosure, celibacy has been for me singularly the hardest part of my more than fifty years in religious life ... but, but, at the same time, it has helped create a special kind of entry into the world and into others' lives that has wonderfully enriched my ministry.

The natural God-given desire for sexual intimacy, for exclusivity in affection, for the marriage bed, for children, for grandchildren, doesn't leave you, and it shouldn't. But celibacy has helped bring into my life a rich, consistent, deep intimacy. Reflecting on my celibate vocation, all I may legitimately feel is gratitude.

Celibacy isn't for everyone. It excludes you from the normal; it seems brutally unfair at times; it's fraught with dangers ranging from serious betrayal of trust to living a selfish life; and it's a fault in your very chastity – but, if lived out in fidelity, it can be wonderfully generative and does not exclude you from either real intimacy or real happiness.