

Rolheiser: Consecrated celibacy – an apologia

Huston Smith, the renowned commentator on world religions, submits that you should not judge a religion by its worst expressions, but by its best, its saints. That's also true in terms of judging the merits of vowed, consecrated celibacy. It should be judged by its best, not perverse, examples, as is true too for the institution of marriage.

I write this apologia because today consecrated celibacy is under siege from critics in almost every circle. Celibacy is no longer understood or deemed realistic by a culture which basically refuses to accept any restrictions in the area of sexuality and in effect sees all celibacy, lived for whatever reason, as frigidity, naiveté, or a misfortune of circumstance.

Our culture constitutes a virtual conspiracy against celibacy.

More critical still is how consecrated celibacy is being judged in the wake of the clerical sexual abuse scandal.

More and more, there's a popular conception both within society and within church circles that sexual abuse in general and pedophilia in particular is more prevalent among priests and religious than in the population at large and that there's something inherent in consecrated celibacy itself that makes priests and vowed religious more prone to sexual misconduct and emotional ill health. How true is this?

Are celibates more prone to sexual misconduct than their non-celibate contemporaries? Are celibates more likely to be less healthy and happy in general than those who are married or who are sexually active outside of marriage?

This must be adjudicated, I believe, by looking at the deepest intentions of sex itself and, from there, assessing where both married persons and celibates for the most part tend to end up.

What's the ultimate intention of sex? What is this powerful archetypal energy meant to do in us?

Generically, the answer is clear: Sex is meant to lead us out of ourselves, out of aloneness, out of selfishness, into altruism, into family, into community, into generativity, into mellowness of heart, into delight, into happiness, and ultimately (perhaps not always this side of eternity) into ecstasy.

Viewed through the prism of this criterion how do marriage and vowed celibacy compare?

Mostly we see parallels: Some people get married, become healthily generous and generative, remain faithful to their spouses, and age into wholesome, happy, forgiving persons. Others write a different chronicle. They get married (or are sexually active outside of marriage) but do not become more generous and generative, do not remain faithful to their commitments in love, and age instead in sullenness, bitterness, and unhappiness.

The same is true for vowed celibates: Some make the vow and become healthily generous and generative, remain faithful to the vow, and age into wholesome, happy, forgiving persons. For some others, most everything in their lives belies the transparency and fruitfulness that should stem from their celibacy and they do not become more selfless, generative, mellow, or happy. Instead, like some of their sexually active contemporaries, they also grow sullen, bitter, and unhappy.

Sometimes this is the result of breaking their vow and sometimes it's the result of an unhealthy repressed sexuality. In either case, their vow isn't fruitful and generally leads to unhealthy compensatory behaviors.

Celibacy, admittedly, comes fraught with some extra dangers because marriage and sex are the normal path that God intended for us. As Merton once put it, in celibacy we live inside a loneliness which God, himself, has condemned: It is not good for the man to be alone!

Sex and marriage are the norm and celibacy deviates from that. But that doesn't mean celibacy cannot be highly generative, meaningful, and healthy and make for wholesomeness and happiness.

Some of the most generative and wholesome people that I know are vowed celibates, aging into an enviable mellowness and peace. Sadly, the reverse is also true for some celibates. Of course, all of this is equally true, both ways, for the married people that I know.

By their fruits you shall know them. Jesus offers us this as a criterion for judgment.

But in judging celibacy and marriage (just in judging religions) we might add Huston Smith's counsel that we should judge each by its best expressions, by its saints, and not by its unhealthy expressions.

Looking at marriage and celibacy, we see in each both healthy and unhealthy manifestations; and it doesn't seem that either side trumps the other in terms of manifesting sanctity or dysfunction.

That's not surprising since, in the end, both choices demand the same thing, namely, a willingness to sacrifice and sweat blood for the sake of love and

fidelity.

Some celibates are unfaithful, and some are pedophiles, but some become Mother Teresa. It's worth mentioning too that Jesus was a celibate.

Some married persons are unfaithful, some are abusive, and some murder their spouses, but some give tangible, embodied, holy expression to God's unconditional love for the world and Christ's unbreakable bond with his church.

Sexuality is a reality that can be lived out in different modalities, and both marriage and celibacy are holy choices that can, sadly, go wrong.