By Fr. John Linden, Director of Seminarians

**Celibacy and sexuality**

To understand celibacy it is important to have a good understanding of human sexuality because celibacy will call for the strength to make certain renunciations but will also (if understood and lived correctly) provide fulfillment for one’s sexual nature. In fact, the primary reason that people sometimes see celibacy in a negative light is that they see it as denying a person’s sexual nature. However, the sexuality of the celibate is never to be denied. To understand this, it must be realized that human sexuality is about much more than just sexual intimacy. Our sexuality reveals a relational aspect in human nature which orients each of us outside of ourselves and toward an “other” while also providing a form of receptivity to that same “other”. Often people will think that a person can’t live without having sex. The reality is that what a person cannot live without is deep intimate union. Ironically, many people having lots of sex in the world these days are often lacking any form of deep intimate union while many celibates enjoy great intimate union without having any sex!

**Male and Female He Created Them**

Only in relation to such a meaning of the masculinity and femininity of the human person does the call to voluntary continence ‘for the kingdom’ find a full guarantee and motivation.” (TOB 80:5)

It is through the sexual uniqueness of both the male and female aspects of the one human nature that something about the nature of God is revealed to the world. The male and female difference in human nature comes from God and therefore so does the reality of the male-female complementarity. This reveals a truth that both men and women will find their ultimate complementarity in God alone. For this reason it is possible for the consecrated celibate to find fulfillment of sexual complimentary while on earth; a fulfillment that is just as complete as one can find in earthly marriage, and, in certain respects, even more so. For all those who go to heaven will “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mt 22:30) and yet will be fulfilled far beyond anything experienced on earth. St. John Paul, in referring to this passage from Matthew’s Gospel tells us that in heaven “there is a condition of life without marriage, in which man, male and female, finds at one and the same time the fullness of personal giving and of the intersubjective communion of persons, thanks to the glorification of his whole psychosomatic being in the eternal union with God.” (TOB 73:1)

Though the celibate does not exercise the sexual gift in an intimate bodily expression, the reality is that a total bodily (psychosomatic) gift is still being offered. Celibates are called to offer their whole mind, spirit and body in response to Christ, who offered his whole being in every act while on earth culminating in his total gift on the Cross. “So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma” (Eph 5:1,2).
As priests, we often have but two things we can be sure to do by our own volition each day: to wake up and hopefully, to fall asleep. All too often it is the case that everything else during the day becomes a matter of whatever God and the people ask of us to do. Of course, we must make room for deep prayer (including the Mass) and maybe a bite or two to eat here and there but our life can become almost pure gift (see Jn 21:18). I have discovered that a key to happiness for me as priest is to simply thank God whenever I am able to enjoy something that I actually planned for myself; I have learned to recognize it as a gift and stop expecting it as if it were a right! Our whole life, along with our whole being, is meant to be gift and we can grow comfortable with that only when it is a gift given freely in union with and in imitation of Christ Jesus crucified.

**Spousal and Parental Longings**

Consecrated celibates remind us of this first union that comes before any earthly marital unions. Such a gift from heaven helps us all to keep our focus on God which is especially important when earthly relationships do not meet our expectations. As celibates, we have the chance to show others how to direct their deepest need for affirmation toward God and this can truly help prevent the temptation to see anyone other than God (even an earthly spouse) as a “savior.” “I [St. John Paul] would say, the absolute and eternal spousal meaning of the glorified body will be revealed in union with God himself…that will unite all the ‘sharers in the other world,’ men and women, in the mystery of the communion of saints” (TOB 75:1)

Just as the love of the spouses in marriage is meant to be expressed in a gift that brings new life into the world so spiritual parenthood is a very important aspect in the life of the celibate priest. According to St. John Paul, “a special significance attaches to man’s spiritual and supernatural fruitfulness – which comes from the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of God), and which, in a specific sense and in determined cases, is served precisely by continence – and that is precisely continence for the ‘kingdom of heaven.’” This draws me to reflect on how moved I always am by the “Spirit of God” giving such abundant spiritual and eternal life through me to that child in my hands at the baptismal font or to others in the confessional and at the celebration of Mass. No earthly parent can give this eternal life to their children which means Christ through me is giving more life to these children than did their physical parents! The celibate St. Paul speaks of this life-generating gift in a spiritual way when he addresses the Galatians, “My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!” (Gal 4:19)
Celibacy is a call to deep friendship

Friendships in this world are good. God created human beings in his own image and likeness and God is communal – a Holy Trinity of persons that share love and life. All close friendships with others can facilitate a humble and honest sharing of the self which always leads to the joy that any two or more people are seeking to find in friendship. As all husbands and wives know, marriage can naturally help people to remain humble because one cannot hide their faults from their spouse indefinitely. So too, celibates, especially those who live alone in the world, need to build up circles of close friendships for the purpose of remaining honest with themselves, with others and with God and in return providing the same service to their friends. This is the only means of truly making a gift of oneself.

In imitation of Christ, all priests are being called to offer themselves as a gift completely and honestly to Christ’s Bride the Church (see TOB 95b:4). I recall that fear of exposing my many personal weaknesses was by far my biggest hang-up while discerning the priesthood. I knew that people would become all too familiar with my multiple weaknesses if I became a priest! Intimate friends therefore, where it is impossible to hide in pretentiousness, assisted me then and continue to greatly do so now in becoming an honest priestly gift. It seems that my friends are constantly bursting my self-imagined glorified bubbles. Here I am, like me or not, you’re stuck with me...and I, oh yeah, I’m stuck with you too!

Fraternity among priests is one of the most essential means of development in true priestly virtues. Brothers who can empathetically relate to what a man deals with on a daily basis in the priesthood can help tremendously in keeping a priest from turning inward and beginning to pity himself or to seek pity from others. Of course, on a more positive note, the reason for friends is that all of us, even celibate priests, are made for communion and for happiness found in companionship. It is a great gift to have brothers who can remind oneself often of the joy in being called to this great work of Christ and not being called alone. To use an honest example of joyful priestly companionship I would say that being from Michigan (a superb state for microbreweries), one of my favorite leisure time experiences is to try out a new selection of craft brews with my priestly brothers. Michigan Beer Fest is always a joyful time just watching and greeting all of the good Catholics and others who are astounded to be sharing one of their favorite bourbon barrel stouts with one or more of their favorite priests!

Friendships with Women

Just as for the married couple, some of what the celibate priest will understand about a heavenly complementarity with God will be discovered in the opposite sex here on earth. It is important for priests therefore to cultivate healthy friendships with women. One of the struggles that I sometimes see in brother priests is a somewhat paralyzing fear of confronting their own attractions to women which can then lead to an awkwardness in the presence of woman and subsequently leave them less accessible to their sisters in Christ. At other times I’ve noticed what seems to be an excessive need to express forms of “manliness” in fraternal friendships possibly in order to prove to the brothers that women don’t control them. In their engagements with the opposite sex (including parents and siblings
of the opposite sex, congregants, spiritual directees, friends, etc.) the celibate is actually being offered an opportunity to grow in the understanding of God through the different approaches, concerns, interests, etc. that are found in women. It is essential that a priest begins to take the time necessary to get to know women on a deeper level than what can be gained just in formal settings? The celibate St. John Paul II could never have written the books, encyclicals, and Wednesday Audiences (which have now become a unique “Theology of the Body”) on the subject of male-female complementarity if he had not developed some deeper and more engaging relationships with women.

A woman’s natural receptivity can align itself in distinctive ways with the spiritual exercise of receiving Christ as her lover. In so doing, women celibates offer for our imitation unique forms of relational patterns that are helpful in all of our efforts to unify ourselves with Christ. Male celibates along with all of the faithful need the particular example of women celibates in order to understand our own need for becoming intimately receptive before Christ. It is often taught that as Christians we need to be Marian in posture (receptive to the Spirit of God) before we can be Petrine in mission. Such openness to him will be lived out to the full in heaven and yet is meant to begin for each of us here on earth. Mysterious as it may seem, in a rightly ordered relationship with God, as women and men, we are all bride before the Divine Bridegroom.

For the past six years I have worked in a partnership with a female vocation director who is called to consecrated life herself. Our work together includes designing vocational discernment and Theology of the Body talks and in many cases offering them in co-presentations. Through this opportunity to work with her I have to admit that I have learned things about my call to celibacy that I don’t believe I could have ever learned from any brother in Christ. She has expanded my understanding of being open and vulnerable to Christ in ways that may at first seems more natural for women but are actually meant for all. And yet in God’s way of designing male and female in complementarity, these unique gifts are meant to be in certain ways taught to men by women.

Nevertheless, living as a celibate in the world will require proper boundaries when engaging any member of the opposite sex (not to mention proper boundaries between members of the same sex). Boundaries will inevitably vary between consecrated persons as spiritual maturity varies between them and boundaries will also vary by degree of relationships (family, friends, acquaintances). In the end for the consecrated celibate only God will become the deepest “other” in their lives on a level that is a total exchange of self-gift. God alone becomes their deepest and most intimate friend.

**Friend of the Bridegroom**

For the celibate man, friendships lived in honesty and with purity in the world are never distractions from their relationship with Christ Jesus. In fact, deep and well-formed friendships lend themselves to giving a celibate the skills for a deep and well-formed friendship with Christ. For the male celibate particularly, love for Christ can be most easily seen in the form of the deepest manner of friendship; a friendship where nothing is withheld about the self and is totally entrusted to the other. It is also a friendship in which everything offered by the other is willingly accepted by the self. Love for the male
celibate is often expressed in his will to suffer all of the sufferings and also share in all of the joys of his most intimate friend. “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another.” (Jn 15:11-17)

From the battlefield to the playing field men are often deeply attracted to heroic sacrifice. To give it all for the victory is a form of greatness that appeals to the masculine heart. Men have a particular spiritual sense that they are called to lead the charge in laying down their lives for others. It can be difficult, however, for a man to imagine his celibacy in the context of “spousal love” for Christ and yet the male celibate is called to a deep love that is indeed quite intimate. “Continence ‘for the kingdom of heaven,’ the choice of virginity or celibacy for one’s whole life, has become in the experience of the disciples and followers of Christ the act of a particular response to the love of the Divine Bridegroom, and therefore acquired the meaning of an act of spousal love” (TOB 79:9).

**Celibacy is an Expansive Gift of Love**

Loving those whom Christ loves not only allows the consecrated celibate to experience Christ’s profound love for others but also allows the celibate to begin to experience Christ’s love for themselves. The celibate St. Paul wrote to his spiritual children in Corinth, “I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?” (2 Cor 12:15) St. Paul felt the deep intimacy of Christ’s love for him in the outpouring of himself for others. Celibacy offers the opportunity to exercise more self-giving love to more people and in doing so expands the ability to receive the love of God through those people. In the priesthood this love can be experienced in many ways. For example, he may find a deep sense of intimacy with God in offering the sacraments while clearly discerning the power and love of Christ working within himself through these gracious gifts from heaven. Through those same Sacraments, therefore, he can also feel a deep intimacy with the Bride that he is serving and laying his life down for. It is a humble yet radical love that sees all other people as God’s children and as one’s own brothers and sisters. “And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother’” (Mt 12:49, 50).
The Invitation of Christ

The consecrated celibate is, by invitation, attempting to live a relationship with God here on Earth that is similar to the one that will be experienced in “the kingdom of heaven.” In the end, the only way for one to truly understand the great joy of a consecrated celibate love for Jesus Christ and his Bride the Church in this world is to first be called by God to this gift and then go on and live it out to the fullest. It is not a call that actually can be fully understood by those who haven’t received it and so it is not a wonder that there are many who see it as some form of denial rather than as a deeply fulfilling gift. Jesus himself said, “...and there are others who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone understand this who can” (Mt 19:12).

In my experience, from the first inklings of a recognition of the call and unto this day, what has brought me the greatest joy is the knowledge that celibacy is a gift offered more by God than by me. It was and is offered to me daily as God’s choice first. Even though I have gladly chosen to respond with a “yes” to this call it has never been in my response that I have found the greatest joy; rather, it has always been in God’s call. He has over and over again given me glimpses (sometimes subtle and other times more profound) of a continuous attention he turns toward me and also of his complete affirmation of me. This doesn’t mean that I always receive what I want from him or do what I should for him. In fact, his attention often reveals my selfishness and lack of faithful trust in him. But even that attention to my sinful ways is an attention that I just can’t seem to get enough of. I love that he loves me enough even to let me have it on the chin once in a while when I mess up and yet, while doing so, proves his ever present approval of my belonging to him. The fact that he keeps making his love abundantly clear to me is what makes me love him all the more every day in my yet imperfect ways. My celibate response to Christ is in the end a particular response to “the Redeemer’s spousal love; a gift of self understood as a renunciation, but realized above all out of love” (TOB 79:9).

The true call to consecrated celibacy is discerned through the discovery of one thing – a burning desire for Christ that just cannot be quenched by anything other than a radical union with him. This is a love that makes one almost forget all the other loves in the world. It is accompanied by a faith-filled trust that inflames in the person a desire to abandon themselves and their life totally to God. “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those that love him” (1Cor 2:9).