

*Just what is a healthy celibate sexuality? How do vowed celibates foster such a sexuality? And how can vocation ministers encourage a healthy approach to this vow?*

## **The gift of sexuality: its challenge and blessing within a life of vowed celibacy**

by Kevin P. McClone

In the last several years I have been privileged to hear first hand the many struggles, challenges and blessings of sexuality in lives of committed celibate men and women. I have come to believe that this gift of celibate sexuality, when authentically lived out, can be a powerful witness of the mystery of creative and authentic loving. At its best, healthy, celibate sexuality engenders passion, commitment, sensuality, and creative and generative acts of loving. At its worst, celibate sexuality becomes destructive to both self and others, and rather than being a blessing, it is experienced as an intolerable burden.

One of the crucial challenges that vocation directors face today is finding candidates who have the potential for embracing sexuality in a healthy way in the context of their celibate commitments. This is no easy task. Many vocation and formation personnel have asked me, "Just what is a healthy celibate sexuality?" In this article, I'll explore this question. I will highlight what I see as several key characteristics of healthy, sexual celibate persons and conclude with some implications for vocation directors, including some practical questions to explore in their work with candidates.

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### **How to be sexual and celibate?**

**To be sexual and celibate is fundamentally to be relational.** Sexuality, according to Fran Ferder and John Heagle is fundamentally our energy for being alive and growing in relationship. It is our unique way of embodying our gendered existence as male and female. Every person of faith is called by God in a covenant of love to witness to that love in and through their relationships. So too, the sexual celibate is one committed to relating to self, other, and God in authentic and respectful ways.

When sexuality is fully embraced as a gift within a life of celibate chastity, it touches all aspects of the human person—the intellectual, emotional, physical, social and moral dimensions. This means that how one thinks, perceives, feels, responds, acts, and prays their sexuality are all important. Problems arise when one of these important areas is neglected. For example, one of the concrete ways we relate to ourselves is how we perceive and respond to our physical bodies. Being sexual and celibate leads to a growing appreciation of and acceptance of oneself as an embodied person. The sexual celibate takes seriously the message of the incarnation, challenging dualistic understandings of flesh and spirit. Sexual celibates, then, come to view the body not as something separate but as integral to who they are.

What are some signs that a candidate respects his or her embodied self? One concrete way is through taking time for rest, exercise, hobbies, being with friends or enjoying reflective solitude. This incarnational stance leads to respect for one's total sensuality, including physical, emotional and affective needs. Many men, for example, have difficulty listening to the rhythms of their bodies, telling them to slow down and attend to

their needs for relaxation, exercise, and connection with nature, friendships, and the beauty around them.

Vocation directors can see disrespect for embodiment reflected in unhealthy responses to instinctual demands, such as over-dependency on food, sex, alcohol, or the Internet. These violate the body's natural rhythms. Our bodies can teach us so much if we listen to them, but often we wait until they demand our attention through too much stress, work or compulsive activity. In my own clinical work, I have also seen how sexual wounds such as past physical, emotional or sexual abuse negatively impact a person's overall body image. For example, I see this reflected in the wider Western culture, with so many young women who fall victim to eating disorders, like anorexia and bulimia nervosa, in an effort to live up to an unrealistic and distorted cultural ideal of beauty and thinness.

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### **Emotional growth is important**

To be sexual and celibate calls one to grow in an appreciation for one's affective and emotional life. Daniel Goleman in his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, notes that too often the head has received primacy over the heart in our understanding of what is the measure of a successful person. I am convinced that the most neglected aspect of sexuality is our affective and emotional life. How one deals with his or her sexual feelings, including one's longings, joys, loves, losses, and fears is crucial to embracing this gift of celibate chastity. Vocation directors may find it useful to look at what emotions are easy for the candidate to express and what feelings may be difficult to identify or express.

Growing in one's affective life means being more open to the range of feelings we possess. Many times when I listen to the sexual struggles of men and women religious, what I hear is often less about sex

per se and more about struggles in dealing with their emotional world, such as coping with loneliness, fear, anxiety, unmet intimacy needs, or lack of understanding from others. Some men for example, are good at dealing with anger but find it hard to experience sadness, loss and grief. Others may find it really hard to either ask for help or receive compliments from others. Some others may have difficulty being spontaneous. In my experience, those who are growing in their sexual and celibate lives are better able to experience the passion and joy of living. Implied in the life-long journey of celibate loving is that mistakes will be made. So some crucial challenges will be a willingness to take risks in sharing oneself in appropriate ways and finding sources of support. Candidates who have difficulty asking for help from others or who do not recognize their need for support may have a particularly difficult time.

In this area of the candidate's affective development, some practical questions for vocation directors to ponder might be the following: Does the candidate seem fearful of getting close to others? Are there friends with whom he or she can share deeply? Are there some feelings that he/she finds it hard to deal with (i.e. anger, sadness, grief, guilt, conflict, loneliness, anxiety etc.) For example, in listening to their stories, what predominant emotions are expressed and which feelings seem absent or are avoided all together? Given that all of us experience loneliness as a part of life, how has the person dealt with loneliness in the past? Are they comfortable in discussing sexual feelings or exploring their relational history? What sexual wounds, hurts, or negative messages of sexuality were a part of their history? Do they have compassion for their own failings and limitations, or do they judge themselves harshly? What about assertiveness with regard to their sexuality? Do they dominate others in relationship? Can they say no confidently, or do they allow others to manipulate them?

### **Close friends, generativity, self-acceptance**

**Healthy celibate sexuality sees friendship and affective intimacy with others as an important part of growth.** Contrary to the older religious ideal of no particular friendships, today the support of soul mates and intimates who support one's celibate commitment is seen as crucial to an integrated celibate and sexual life. Indeed, the celibate man or woman who has a wide array of support from family, friends and community is better equipped to meet the many challenges of celibate life. This includes healthy relationships with

women, men, married couples, and persons with different sexual orientations. So too, with the cultural diversity that exists, the healthy sexual and celibate person will grow in their appreciation for the many diverse cultures that grace our world. Candidates who are secure in their sense of self will be well equipped to relate to diverse persons and in so doing foster further growth.

**Another key characteristic is the capacity for generativity.** Celibacy then does not mean a denial or repression of sexuality but rather a respectful integration of one's desires, urgings, and longings in the service

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of generative loving. Real intimacy involves a commitment to love that goes beyond a mere self-centered focus toward generative love to others and God. Sexuality as gift is rooted in our call to love. To be able to give oneself to love, one must first have experienced love. When one experiences a sense of belonging and genuine care growing up, that person is better equipped to deal with the challenges involved in authentic celibate loving. What makes it hard for some candidates to be generative is not having experienced that gift of generative love from parents and caregivers growing up. For some this has led to relationships that become one-sided where they either seek to fill the void through dominating others in relationship, or becoming overly dependent on them. Yet mature and generative loving ultimately leads us outward, not inward.

**So a major challenge to healthy celibate sexuality is coming to more fully accept and embrace the person one is now.** Indeed it is not difficult to see the critical importance of self-esteem. If people do not see

themselves as lovable, attractive, and worthwhile human beings, they will seek sources and people outside of self to fill the empty void, and still be left wanting. No one can supply what we lack; if one is alienated from self, they will lack the capacity for full and responsible loving. Ultimately, I can't give what I don't have. And I can't receive what I don't believe myself worthy of having. For those who have experienced past emotional, physical, or sexual abuse the challenges to heal those wounds may at times be overwhelming. Indeed the experience of abuse leaves sexual wounds that may take years to heal.

Vocation directors need to be aware that those who have experienced abuse may have difficulty investing the energy needed to fully engage in the challenges of the formation process. Important areas to explore would be the extent of the abuse, the impact on the person, and the degree to which painful experiences and traumas have been worked through

### **Acceptance of sexual feelings**

**While the celibate forgoes direct genital expression, they do not deny their genitality.** Celibates commit to a particular way of loving that forgoes direct genital expression for the sake of gospel values. This means that one's sexual attractions, desires, and longings, are welcomed as normal and natural aspects of the gift of being fully human. However, when sexuality in the context of celibacy is seen as more a burden than a blessing, it can lead to one of two extremes—either to a cold dispassionate celibate life rooted in an avoidance and fear of these genital stirrings, or a compulsive pattern of sexual behavior fueled more by a desire to avoid pain than to obtain real fulfillment.

Celibate men and women who are truly loving, vibrant, and passionate in their commitments challenge the cultural notion that living without direct genital sexual experience leaves one incomplete as human persons. We live in a world where sex is often reduced to how one performs physically and not how one relates emotionally. This emphasis on performance has distorted a more holistic understanding of sexuality and often led to greater objectification of both women and men. The problem here is that the wider culture has separated sexuality from spirituality, and in doing so the sacred gift is lost. Full human loving that embraces the gift of sexuality is less about what one does with their genitals and more about what one does with their hearts, minds, spirit and will. Indeed, in my clinical experience working with persons who struggle with sexual compulsions and addictions, one may of-

ten have lots of genital sexual activity yet not have a clue about what real intimacy and mature loving is about. In fact, sex for many becomes more a way to escape pain rather than a way to find real fulfillment.

**The characteristic of balance and harmony is important to a healthy sexuality.** In my experience, when individuals approach their sexual selves more out of anxiety, fear or shame, rather than trust and hope, the harmony and balance is not there. Celibate people who see sexuality as “dangerous” become frightened of sexual feelings that they view as threats rather than stirrings that call a person to prayerfully attend to unmet needs for affection, intimacy, belonging or connection.

What, then, leads to greater balance and harmony for the sexual celibate? Essentially, harmony is sought in

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the balanced attention to intimacy with self, others, and God. Sandra Schneiders speaks of this balance when she discusses the harmony needed between the unitive, communitarian, and ministerial aspects of one’s celibate commitment. Being centered in God (union) we experience love in and through one another (covenantal or communal dimension) but are also called to go out in loving service (ministry). Each of these dimensions is important for sexual celibate balance. For example, the celibate person who avoids getting close to others but rather pours all his or her energy into ministry may lack this sense of balance. For another, the imbalance comes in an excessive preoccupation with self while neglecting the call to minister outward to others.

**For the sexual celibate, images of what it means to be a man or a woman can vary widely, and cultural**

**stereotyped roles may be an obstacle.** Each celibate person must come to terms with a healthy sense of masculinity and femininity. The challenge in being sexual and celibate is to transcend narrow stereotyped images of men and women and allow for greater openness and acceptance to God’s revelation in one’s gendered existence. For example, in a recent retreat I facilitated with a group of religious men in temporary vows, the questions of differing images of masculinity and femininity arose. Many of these young men struggled with the more stereotyped images of men such as the sports heroes or “Rambo” types, often portrayed in the media. These men who were powerful and strong but seldom vulnerable did not fit with their own lived experience. By sharing deeply with one another, many of these men were able to free themselves from the narrow cultural scripts of “what a man is” and claim more authentically what both masculinity and femininity have come to mean for them.

**Celibate sexuality as a gift is open to the diversity and range of sexual experiences and expressions.** In my experience, as we grow more comfortable in the sexual area, our relationship circles widen. By this I mean we gradually become more open and less judgmental toward those who may differ from us. The stranger may be the other gender, race, or sexual orientation. Whatever the reality, when I grow more secure in my own sexual identity, I become less threatened and more open to the other. Healthy sexual and celibate persons are those who seek to grow in tolerance for the wide range of diversity that exists.

**Sexuality as gift implies a single-hearted commitment to celibate chastity that is freely chosen.** The more conscious we are of our choices, the more fully we embrace them as authentically ours. Without this ongoing choosing, our commitments lose their motivating zeal, and soon the creative energy for life and love fades. This choice doesn’t mean that one does not also grieve real significant losses on the way. Sexual celibates are open to grieving the loss of children or spouses; these and other losses come to the surface in different developmental stages. Indeed, all committed life choices involve the real challenge of healthy asceticism where one lets go of some desires for the sake of others. This challenges candidates to religious life to foster a healthy discipline or capacity to let go that is not so much a denial of authentic needs, but rather a relationally motivated asceticism in the service of love.

We can too easily say that my sexuality is only my business. Indeed, one of the greatest dangers for a reli-

gious sister, brother, or priest is a privatized sexuality. Love is ultimately meant to shine, and what is hidden can too easily become destructive. Recently, in a conversation I had with a group of vowed men and women religious, the topic of celibate sexuality was discussed in small group sharing. These young religious women and men found hope in their willingness to risk sharing common longings, loneliness, joys, and struggles that they experienced in their celibate journey. Many said the experience was liberating and had hopes that the conversation would continue. To grow to be sexual and celibate challenges one to continue the dialogue beyond seminars and workshops on sexuality to the daily struggles and yearnings in relationship.

### **Implications for vocation directors**

Vocation directors may ask, are there certain skills, abilities and understandings that a person must develop to fully embrace celibacy? First and foremost a person can cultivate skills that allow greater openness, disclosure and vulnerability—all of which are crucial to growth in relationship. Healthy communication and assertiveness skills may be useful to develop, as well as a healthy appreciation for one's own limitations. Candidates can be encouraged to develop skills of self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-acceptance.

Sexual celibates are creative lovers who are capable of both giving and receiving love from others. To see sexuality as gift involves embracing its mystery with an attitude of reverence and solitude. Vocation directors, in reflecting with candidates, may have them ponder the following questions: Given my life in relationship growing up, what have I learned about myself? What are my strengths and weaknesses in relating to others? Do I lord it over others in my relating? Or do I passively become dependent on them? Do I relate comfortably with those of the same sex? Opposite sex? Do I lack confidence in relating to others? Who do I find it easy to relate to? Who do I find it hard to relate to? Am I able to exercise positive choice in my sexual activities? Am I able to be emotionally available to others? Do I understand, respect, and nurture my body? Finally, can I pray comfortably about my sexual feelings, longings, and attractions? Is there at least one person with whom I can share deeply, including my relational joys and struggles? Finally, is my life imbued with meaning and passion and an aliveness that reflects a fullness of love's gift?

Vocation directors can assist through encouraging dia-

logue and openness with regard to issues of human sexual development and integration. They can help by becoming compassionate listeners to candidate's relational histories, being aware of the areas of psychosexual development that may have been neglected or unattended along the way. Special awareness to issues of sexual identity and past wounds, such as emotional or sexual abuse, will be key. To do this effectively, vocation directors must themselves be willing to explore their own sexual journeys and become more comfort-

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able and confident in discussing a myriad of sexual issues with candidates. Indeed many persons coming into religious life today may in some ways be more comfortable and confident in discussing some sexual issues than their vocation director or formator may be.

Many vocation directors as well as candidates may also be helped through concrete knowledge and education in areas of human sexuality such as psychosexual development, sexual abuse, sexual orientation, gender, and intimacy issues. They may benefit from encouragement to explore their own sexual journey and relational history. To grow in mature loving, implied by a celibate commitment, involves holistic psychosexual maturity and a process of coming to embrace one's limitations and vulnerabilities. This is a life-long journey of growth and the goal is progress, not perfection. When celibate candidates embrace this gift of sexuality, it becomes gradually reflected in greater sensitivity to one's physical, emotional, social, and other relational needs. Vocation directors who seek continual growth in their own sexuality and are open to becoming more comfortable and confident in sexual matters will be better equipped to assist those candidates seeking guidance. Indeed, the witness value of passionate celibate lives, well lived, may be the vocation director's best resource in fostering vocations to religious life. +