

**THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN  
LIVING PRIESTLY CELIBACY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE  
PRESENT DAY CRISIS IN THE CHURCH IN ASIA**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

*- Fr. Lawrence Pinto, MSIJ*

At the last meeting of FABC-Office of Clergy held at the Assumption University, Bangkok, in November, 2011, it was decided that the FABC-OC will organize a seminar for Bishops, Formators and Priests of Asia on the theme: "The Contemporary Challenges in Living Priestly Celibacy in the Context of the Present Day Crisis in the Church in Asia." This decision was necessitated by the Celibacy problems among priests in different countries of Asia.

The Western and American influence is being felt in all countries of Asia through cable-TV and other Mass-media bombardment; while human society is undergoing changes in its culture-structure, it is also influencing the Church. Priests are also adversely affected by these cultural changes and more importantly by, moral relativism, poor psychosexual development, emotional immaturity, and a lack of awareness of one's own identity as man or as a priest or future priest. Some priests also seem to entertain a care-free attitude towards their Celibate Life. While we all know, priests are not to be living in isolation, yet the dignity of priesthood, and the responsibility of priests towards the Church and the people of God cannot be neglected. The Crisis in Celibacy in the Church in Asia today not only affects the life of priests, but also it adversely affects pastoral ministry, priestly spirituality, and even to some extent, disturbs the faith of the people of God.

Ninety-one participants of the above seminar, consisting of 1 Cardinal, 2 Archbishops, 5 Bishops, 83 seminary formators and priests from 7 countries of Asia (India, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam, Pakistan, Indonesia and Thailand), gathered at the Suvarnabhumi Campus of the Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand from 14<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2012. It was organized by Bishop Vianney Fernando, the chairman, and Fr. Lawrence Pinto, the executive secretary of the FABC-Office of Clergy.

## **The Objectives of the Seminar**

1. To help Bishops, Formators and Priests to reflect on how postmodern culture and moral relativism in the modern world affects priestly celibacy.
2. To help Bishops and Formators to become more deeply aware of their responsibility to ensure that the seminarians are guided and directed to grow psychosexually during their formation towards a healthy future Celibate Priesthood.
3. To help Priests meet the challenges of the present world in keeping with priestly celibacy and to maintain the dignity of Priesthood.

## **The Main Topics and the Speakers**

1. Healthy Psychosexual Development for Healthy Celibate Life: Fr. Lawrence Pinto
2. Caring for Priests in Sexual Difficulties: Heterosexual & Other Involvements: Oswald Cardinal Gracias
3. The Effect of Post-Modernism & Relativism on Contemporary Priestly Life: Fr. Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR
4. Priestly Fraternity as a Safeguard for Celibate Life: Archbishop Luis Antonio G. Tagle
5. Psycho-spiritual Means for Celibate Life: Counseling and Spiritual Direction: Peter Lechner,sP

## **PANEL DISCUSSION**

6. The Impact of E-Revolution on the Priestly Celibacy and Chastity: Fr. Jaime Noel Deslate
7. Prayer and Asceticism for Healthy Celibate Life: Bishop Vianney Fernando

## 8. Healthy Habits for the Physical Well-Being of the Priest: Bishop Mylo Vergara

### **A. Healthy and Holy Sexuality**

Healthy and holy sexuality is rooted in our Christian understanding of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God. This involves an understanding of ourselves as sexual beings, and a formation both human and spiritual for the proper direction of this gift in our lives in the light of our vocation, according to various stages of our development. This is particularly necessary for all persons because we are both wounded and graced in our sexuality.

### **B. Priestly Celibacy**

In the Catholic Church in Asia, priests and those in formation for priesthood are called to live a life of perpetual and perfect celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Although we do not marry nor engage in any of the acts specifically related to marriage, we remain sexual beings, with all the attractions and identifying characteristics associated with this fundamental aspect of our humanity. Paradoxically, this very condition, as a loving and sacrificial way of life, contributes profoundly to our vocation of love, relationship and service of God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, proper human and spiritual formation is all the more necessary for us. This includes moral formation, self-knowledge, strengthening our ability to make free and responsible choices in accord with our vocation, awareness of feelings and underlying beliefs, ability to relate in deep and sincere ways, and being men of communion and communication who can build bridges between God and our brothers and sisters.

### **C. Relevance and Value of Priestly Celibacy**

Were we to forsake the gift of celibacy, we would undoubtedly lose much in terms of witnessing to the spiritual and salvific values of the Kingdom of God incarnate in our human nature.

The people we are called to serve would predictably lose something of the profound respect and confidence they have in Christ's priesthood. We would likely increase the ever-present temptation to see ministry as a profession instead of a vocation. And, single-minded dedication to the immediate service of Christ could easily be lost. This is in no way meant to be a diminishment of the value of the married vocation, but a clarification of the way God has called and graced us to serve his Church, as discerned by the Church itself. All of the above values are particularly suited to and enhance the different and diverse cultures that we have in Asia.

The Rite of Ordination to the Diaconate, in which the candidate makes his promise of celibacy, contains many phrases that help capture the true meaning and spirit of our celibacy: *a sign and motive of pastoral charity ... moved by a sincere love for Christ the Lord ... with an undivided heart ... more freely at the service of God and humankind ... witness that God must be loved above all else.*

#### **D. Celibacy and Post-Modern Society**

In our own times of post-modernism the whole concept of, and the living out of, Christian values in regards to sexuality are in crisis, because of moral relativism which establishes each individual as the sole norm for the goodness or evil of his or her actions, instead of an objective and timeless standard of truth. This affects and negates the very concept of God, who is truth; the meaning and possibility of life-long commitments; our understanding of priesthood, celibacy, and in fact much of what Christ taught us; the relationship of the individual to the community; life based on being rather than just doing. These pervasive tendencies, many of them already well-established in many Western cultures—but not always in all the peoples of these cultures—are more and more influencing the East.

In the challenging conditions of Priestly Celibacy in the Church in Asia today, we recognize the importance of human and spiritual formation, fraternity, support and care within the priestly

community. Over and above all, we believe in our radical dependence upon God and His grace in our lives and Church. As the Blessed Virgin Mary responded to the call to become the Mother of Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, we commit ourselves to following her inspired example in our lives and ministry, and invoke her all powerful maternal intercession and guidance on our celibate journey as we serve the Kingdom of God.

## **II. THE EFFECTS OF POST-MODERNISM AND RELATIVISM ON CONTEMPORARY PRIESTLY LIFE** *- Fr. Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Just as any other form of life, priestly life too, is going through radical changes in the contemporary world. While the Second Vatican Council has been responsible for some of the very positive changes in priesthood, some contemporary trends, especially the Post-Modernist secular trends, have influenced priestly life today in a rather destructive and negative way. Among them, Materialism, Hedonism and Relativism may be identified as those mainly responsible factors for such damages to priestly life.

Post-modernism is described by many scholars as those approaches that are critical of the possibility of objective knowledge of the real world, and consider the ways in which social dynamics, such as power and hierarchy, affect human conceptualizations of the world to have important effects on the way knowledge is constructed and used. It is not a philosophical movement in itself, but rather, it incorporates a number of philosophical and critical methods that can be considered 'post-modern', the most familiar example being Feminism that is prevalent in many developed western nations today. In other words, Post-modernism is not yet another method of doing philosophy, but rather a way of approaching traditional ideas and practices in non-traditional ways that deviate from pre-

established ways. This has caused difficulties in defining what postmodernism actually means or should mean, and therefore, it remains a complex and controversial concept, which continues to be debated. Since Relativism is one of the main concrete products of the complex phenomenon called 'Post-modernism', in this presentation, I will almost exclusively deal with Relativism and how it negatively affects contemporary priestly life, even at the cost of painting a somewhat negative and pessimistic picture of that way of life. In the First Part, I will deal with the phenomenon of Relativism very briefly, and then, in the Second Part, I will attend briefly to some of its impacts on contemporary priestly life.

## **A. RELATIVISM**

Just a few years ago, with the releasing and screening of the film *The Da Vinci Code* there ensued a world-wide controversy. Almost overnight, Dan Brown, the author of the novel on which this film was based, became a household name! What was the reason for this controversy? The main reason was that Brown had based his main plot on what is known as a non-canonical [i.e., not recognized by the Church] "Gnostic gospel" and on Michael Baigent's book, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, both of which belong to fiction. His portrayal of the life of Jesus is exclusively based on this fictitious novel.

However, we know that by the end of the Fourth century, the Church decided to choose from among many life-stories of Jesus Christ ["the gospels"], just four as those which are really inspired by the Holy Spirit and authentically reflecting the true story of Jesus Christ here on earth. So when Dan Brown presented this story of Jesus, according to his own imagination, of course based on fiction, and some erroneous and one-sided interpretations of the gospels, it gave a totally distorted picture of what the Apostolic tradition had bequeathed to us as the true story of Jesus Christ. In other words, such a subjective effort as that of Brown tends to challenge what the Church objectively believes to be true with regard to the life of Jesus. Even before this, there had been

other bizarre subjective and whimsical attempts in looking at the life story of Jesus by other novelists and film directors, too, as expressed, for example, in the well-known films *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Last Temptation of Jesus*.

One can well imagine how things would be if each and everyone comes up with all sorts of bizarre subjective stories of Jesus, according to their own whims and fancies! The objective truth about the historical person of Jesus [as presented to us, by the four gospels and the Tradition] would be challenged by those subjective opinions/stories about the person of Jesus Christ; in the long run, the believers could even get a totally distorted, fictitious picture of the person of Jesus Christ, of course, at the expense of who he really was. Here we have a perfect example of what is known as relativism, for in a situation like this; the objective truth about Jesus would become subjective and relativistic [depending on each one's whims and fancies!]. Consequently, any and every opinion about Jesus would be accorded the status of being "true". This is precisely what has happened in many of the Protestant Churches (especially, in non-mainline splinter groups) and especially in the contemporary Christian fundamentalist sects, for they interpret even the four gospels, subjectively. Different and varied subjective opinions about Jesus ensue, and in the last analysis the objective truth about the person of Jesus Christ is lost.

## **1. What is Relativism?**

When a person claims that all points of view of reality are of equal value, surely he/she ends up in relativism. When a point of view lacks a common reference to reality, it amounts to the mere opinion or the taste of the subject [the person] who holds that opinion. It is an exclusive subjectivism, i.e., it excludes any link with other views of other subjects [persons]. As de Rosa says, in relativism, it is the man (or woman) who becomes the measure, the standard of everything. Each and everyone's opinion about reality, then, becomes "true", subjectively. Moreover, when each and every such exclusive, subjective point of view that is cut off

from a common reference to reality, is assigned an equal value, then, each and every such individual point of view is automatically assigned a relative, 'true' representation of reality. Consequently, each and every individual point of view, by the fact of their very existence, has a claim to be "a true representation" of reality! In other words, relativism holds that there are many "truths" according to the subjects who hold different opinions of reality. Thus, the objective truth automatically becomes relative to each and every such subject or individual person.

The well-known story of the six blind men who wished to know what an elephant was, illustrates vividly what relativism really is. According to this story, each of those blind men touched different parts of the elephant's body, and concluded according to their sense perceptions what an elephant was. The one who touched a leg of the animal concluded that an elephant is like a pillar, the one who touched his trunk perceived an elephant to be a long fleshy pipe-like thing, the one who touched his tail thought an elephant to be a hard wire-like creature, and so on. Each of them came to a conclusion of what an elephant is, depending on his personal [subjective] experience of it through the sense of touch, but none of them had a complete view, a whole view of what an elephant really was. They had only a subjective, partial view of what an elephant in reality is. Surely, if they were to seek the advice of someone who had seen and experienced of what an elephant really is, then, their subjective experiences/views of the elephant would have been well complimented by the objective view, and they would have at least come somewhat nearer to what an elephant was in reality! That is to say, our subjective experiences/views of reality needs to be in dialogue with the objective view of reality, if we are at least to come closer to knowing what reality really is.

## **2. Moral Relativism**

Consequently, the individual person [cut off from the others, i.e., from the community/society and their accumulated moral

wisdom] becomes the arbiter or the judge of what is moral and what is not moral, too, i.e., of what is right and what is wrong, of what is true and what is not true! This is moral relativism, where the individual person is not only the arbiter of morality, but he/she is also the maker/creator of moral truth! This sort of attitude comes for heavy criticism in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* of Pope John Paul II. For in reality, we, human persons, live with others in society/community. We, as persons, do not live isolated lives, as *monads* of Leibnitz. Since we live with other persons in society/community, our actions/behaviour are not isolated or cut off from others; in other words, morality and moral truth are not isolated [subjective] but related to each other in and through society/community [objective]. As such, an individual [cut off from community/society] cannot be the sole arbiter or the judge of what is moral and what is not moral, i.e., of what is right and what is wrong. For what is moral or immoral, what is right or wrong, exists independent of the individual person/subject, but surely related to him/her. Neither could an individual person be the 'creator' of truth, for truth itself exists independent of him/her.

But, in moral relativism, it is the individual human person who in his own exclusive reasoning and freedom, becomes the norm of what is right and what is wrong, often based on his/her feelings/emotions or personal tastes. Moreover, as a direct consequence of contemporary culture [that is post-Modern Culture] today, one experiences a peculiar skepticism and suspicion of customs, traditions and authority. Consequently, in our contemporary world, personal experience is accorded a very high form (if not the highest!) of knowing/experiencing reality. In such a context, moral relativism is inevitable simply because each and everyone's opinion/view [based on his/her personal experience] is considered as the only credible form of knowing and experiencing reality. i.e., "What is true for me, is true for me! What is true for you is true for you!"

How do we judge a human act to be moral or immoral? For example, let us take the act of hitting someone. At its face value,

we would say, that hitting another person is morally wrong. Whether it is the Executive President of the country who hits another person, or whether it is a poor beggar on the street who hits another, the act of hitting another person is normally taken to be morally wrong. It can never be said that the act of hitting done by my friends is correct while the act of hitting done by someone else is wrong. If and when this happens, there is surely a lacuna in the credibility of my morality simply because I am relativistic in determining what is right and what is wrong! This is a perfect example of moral relativism! Such a lack of moral credibility, also leads many to moral relativism, today.

This is precisely what is happening in the international political field today. The USA and the so-called “international community” [which is a respectable name for the USA and her Western Allies, coined by themselves!] are very firm on not negotiating at all with those they call “terrorists”. Thus, from the time of President Bush, the Western leaders were firm in insisting that there will be no negotiations with groups such as *Al Qaeda*, *Hamas*, *Hezbollah*,...etc. who are perceived as a threat to the Western nations. But ironically, the same western nations headed by the USA kept on insisting that nations like Sri Lanka should somehow negotiate with terrorist organizations like the LTTE whom the same Western nations themselves had branded and re-branded as “terrorist organizations”! There is no doubt that in our contemporary world, all conflicts and wars need to be solved in and through negotiations, but the crucial question here is: How [according to the USA and allies] this principle applies only to nations like Sri Lanka, but not for themselves? In other words, they have relativized this contemporary international moral principle of solving conflicts and wars through negotiations to suit their whims and fancies.

Recently, the Apostolic delegate to Syria made a public statement that the Western nations who do not themselves respect the human rights of many peoples in many parts of the world, should leave the rest of the world to manage their own human rights rather than preaching down to them what human rights

ought to be. He ended his statement by highlighting the moral relativism that is more than obvious in the double standards of the Western nations when it comes to practicing human rights and preaching about them to others!

In the same way, let us take the example of a positive moral act, such as alms-giving. Alms-giving whether it is done in the morning or evening, whether it is done in the vicinity of a holy shrine or at one's home, whether it is done by a Catholic or a Buddhist, is always alms-giving, and it is reckoned as a good moral act. Good acts like alms-giving, helping the poor and the down-trodden, fighting for what is right and just, speaking the truth fearlessly,...etc., are always and everywhere regarded as good acts. They are universally [objectively] regarded as good acts. Such acts cannot be good in one place and bad in another! If one holds on to the latter opinion in general, then, one falls into the danger of moral relativism!

### **3. Moral Relativism in the Contemporary World**

There is no doubt that the central moral debate today is mainly to do with moral relativism, i.e., each one subjectively deciding what is right and what is wrong, according to his/her whims and fancies. Just because a terrorist group has a so-called subjectively "good intention" or "motive" or "just cause", it does not justify the recruitment and employment of child soldiers in order to achieve their cause/motive, however noble or just it may be in the eyes of the terrorists and their supporters! Similarly, just because a government wanted to flush out a group of terrorists or the return of a few captured soldiers, does not justify the indiscriminate bombing of entire areas that may cause large-scale civilian deaths! Or just because I have a good intention to put an end to my friend's untold suffering in his sickness, it does not warrant me in subjecting him to euthanasia! Still worse, just because a woman does not wish to have a child, it does not justify her going for an abortion! Please note in all these examples, the normally justifying clause is the intention, but intention alone [which is subjective] does not justify the performance of an act, as

it should be obvious by now. The act-in-itself and the circumstances [i.e., the objective sphere] also need to be considered. In almost all the cases enumerated above, the act-in-itself is intrinsically evil, according to the Church teachings, and as such, morally not permissible.

## **B. SOME MAIN INFLUENCES OF POST-MODERNISM & MORAL RELATIVISM ON CONTEMPORARY PRIESTLY LIFE**

Relativism itself is not necessarily an evil. We, as human subjects, in our very sense perception of reality, do in fact, often engage ourselves in a certain type of relativizing of reality. What is at stake according to this paper is, not such daily trivial relativizing of things, but a mentality, a way of life that is relativistic. Most of the paper is based on my personal experiences in teaching seminarians and priests, and in counseling them as a spiritual director and confessor. As we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we would exclusively concentrate on the negative effects of relativism on contemporary priestly life, even at the risk of portraying only a rather negative and pessimistic view of it. [In no way, would it mean that all contemporary priests are such, or that contemporary priests have no positive traits, at all!] Among the many such negative influences of the prevalent moral relativism on priests today, we would like to briefly highlight the following:

### **The Very Concept of God**

Our very Christian faith is based on our belief in One God. But a serious problem we need to face today is: what sort of God do we believe in? What is our concept of God? Is it the concept which our Judeo-Christian tradition has passed on to us or is it a concept which each of us makes for ourselves [according to our subjective feelings and experiences]?

In the by-gone days, especially due to rigoristic Jansenism in the post-Tridentine period, even Catholic spiritualities erroneously

portrayed God as a stern judge. In our day, many efforts are made rightly to correct this view and to portray the true face of God as revealed by Jesus Christ in the gospels, i.e., as a loving, forgiving, providential Father. However, in the process of stressing this true gospel aspect of God, especially in our formation houses and seminaries (and elsewhere, too), sometimes some tend to go over-board and completely ignore the justice aspect of God. Thus, God is portrayed at times today [even by priests, in their homilies], as someone with whom anything goes! After all, He is all forgiving and loving! One reason for the loss of the sense of sin today is precisely this distorted concept of God, as Pope John Paul II so correctly taught in his *Reconciliatio et Penitentia* [1981]. Accordingly, any moral or immoral behaviour is acceptable to God, simply because He is such a loving, forgiving God! Concepts such as judgment, justice, responsibility for what we do,....etc., are rarely heard or preached by them. Even in their own personal lives, such priests attribute to God an exaggerated, one-sided, subjective interpretation. Laxity in priestly way of life ensues. Consequently, we end up with a 'priestly culture' wherein personal responsibility/accountability to God and to His people (entrusted to priests, as shepherds) is not that important.

Since God sees all things and thus, understands our concrete situations, He will also tolerate any and every behaviour, unlike human beings who are limited and see only certain aspects, they say! Thus, prayer life, going to sacramental confession, fulfilling personal peculiarly priestly duties such as praying the divine Office,....etc. are neglected with rational arguments that seem to be convincing. In fact, the roots of many contemporary priestly vices and immoralities are found in this sort of relativising of the God of the gospels. [i.e., stressing only one aspect of God, while ignoring completely the other aspects; following a 'god' of one's own subjective perceptions].

## **1. The Concept of Truth**

As it should be obvious by now from the above discussion, the first victim of relativism is truth. We, Catholics, traditionally

believe that God is the Truth, and that Truth is one. We also believe that there exists an objective truth, which can be known by human intelligence though perhaps, in different degrees (according to the capacities, life-experiences and circumstances of an individual person). Probably, no human being can ever know the whole of truth, the Absolute Truth in this world. But this does not mean that absolute, objective truth does not exist! Or that all the subjective, individual perceptions of that Absolute Truth are equal! A priest who has had some years of theological training in a seminary cannot afford to hold on to such seriously erroneous views because such views would slowly but surely erode his own faith and eventually, his own vocation to be a priest. The gradual erosion of faith in Jesus, the Truth, the Way and Life is often the result of such relativistic and irresponsible views on the important concept of Truth.

This is where the Church's official teaching on other religions and their ability to attain that Absolute Truth needs to come in. Since the Vatican – II, the Church clearly teaches that other religions do have “the seeds of truth” or “the rays of truth”. Moreover, the Church also holds that other religions, too, are capable of leading their adherents to share the salvation of Christ, at varying degrees; they participate in the one salvific mystery of Jesus Christ, in a way known only to God [LG 16; GS 22]. This is because these religions, too, have been touched by the Holy Spirit (in different degrees) and they too, share in different degrees in the one paschal mystery of Christ, the mystery of salvation. But this in no way would/should mean that all religions are capable of salvation or that all religions are equal!

At times, one hears even ordained Catholic priests saying that all religions are equal, and so, it does not matter whether one is baptized or not! While the Church is very clear about the possibility of salvation of those adherents of other religions who due to no fault of theirs are ignorant of Jesus the Redeemer, but who act according to the dictates of their upright consciences, nowhere does she teach that all (irrespective of their religious faith) are saved. This is precisely what Pope John Paul II, Pope

Benedict XVI, and especially, *Donum Vitae* was trying to teach. In other words, while the Church officially encourages us to enter into dialogue with other religions to harness the “rays” and “seeds” of truth in them, and thus, walk together as pilgrims with them towards the Absolute Truth, the Church has never given up proclaiming the gospel of Jesus simply because this is the very reason for her existence! That is to say that both inter-religious dialogue and proclamation of the gospel are only the two sides of the same coin. In our contemporary pluralistic and diverse world, we need both [proclamation and dialogue] as true followers of Christ, something which some priests have not understood fully. When there are many ‘ways’ proposed to our youth today, we need to tell them that Jesus Christ is “the way, the life and the truth”.

### **The Meaning of a life-long Commitment**

Today, more than ever, the possibility of making a life-long commitment is questioned in all strata of our societies. The growing rates of divorce is a living witness to this. This has impacted priestly life, too, in the sense that there are some who question today whether it is humanly possible at all to make a life-long commitment, especially in view of the ever-changing world of ours. They say that we do neither know nor could predict accurately what would happen in the years to come, and so, they ask eloquently whether it is possible to make a life-long commitment, at all! Thus, they question marriage as a life-long institution, and also, the life-long commitment in consecrated life. Such people seem to conveniently forget that there are so many who have made such commitments not only in priestly (or religious) life, but also in married life, and have kept them faithfully. Also, they seem to forget that societies have always been on the move, have been subjected to all sorts of changes, though surely not to the extent our societies are changing today. After all, the priests are to follow Jesus Christ the Eternal Priest as their supreme model who never wavered in His one and only commitment [mission] to do the will of the Father in all circumstances – circumstances, favourable and non-favourable to

Him. His one and only life-motto was: "My food is to do the will of my Father". This surely is the model of a life-long commitment and an anti-dote to today's relativistic tendencies.

## **Erroneous Comparisons of Priestly/Religious Life with Marriage**

According to the cherished Roman Catholic Tradition both priestly/consecrated life and married life have their own specific value, place and dignity in the world. But they are never considered as equal! However, relativistic trends of our contemporary society tend to compare and contrast these ways of lives as if they are on par, in everything. When certain ordained priests tend to compare themselves with married people, and then, perceive their own particular priestly life as something 'abnormal' if not 'unnatural', we see how much relativism has made its in-roads into contemporary priestly culture. Consequently, there are some priests today who question the very meaning of their priestly commitment, not only with regard to the promise of celibacy but also with regard to poverty and obedience. For example, some would begin to say: "Priestly celibacy is not natural or normal". The implication is that married life is the only natural or normal way of life! One notices here a basic distortion of the very meaning of not only of priestly life, but also of married life. However, we know that even among the married, there is a marital chastity, i.e., a life-long commitment only to one's own spouse, when it comes to activities that are proper exclusively to married people.

## **2. Individual above the Community**

One of the main tenets of relativism is the assumption that everybody has his or her own independence/autonomy irrespective of others in society, and independent also of what those others say, do or hold. This exclusive individualism has its historical roots in modern Western philosophies, beginning with Rene Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am". The philosophical isolation of the individual person from the

community [exclusive subjectivism] began there. The separation of 'subject' and 'object' in science, too, contributed further to exclusive subjectivism. Finally, the Existential and Phenomenological philosophies in the Western world made sure that exclusive subjectivism stood on its own feet firmly.

One consequence of exclusive subjectivism is that everyone has his/her individual 'rights' over and above the community/social obligations. Even the common good (not only of society but also of parishes) are often subdued to one's personal/individual good. Here one needs to note clearly a distorted sense of personal autonomy/independence. The main error here is to forget the basic truth that we humans in reality, live in society with others.

There are some who even go to the extent of invoking the sacred Catholic principle of 'conscience' to justify anything and everything they do: "I act according to my conscience"! Often, this is an epitome of subjectivism that inevitably leads to relativism where everybody becomes right in whatever opinion he/she holds or in whatever he/she does [cfr., *Veritatis Splendor* Nos:54-56,58]. But the all important question is: what sort of 'conscience' are they following? There are various types of consciences, according to various people. Of course, the cherished Roman Catholic tradition has always upheld the right of every person to uphold, follow and live according to his or her own properly formed conscience, and not according to any other type of so-called "conscience" [cfr., *Gaudium et Spes* No:16; *Dignitatis Humanae* Nos: 2,3,14; *Veritatis Splendor* Nos:54, 58,59]. This necessarily means not an individualistic, exclusively subjective, conscience that is fully isolated from others or the rest of the society/community.

As far as our Catholic faith is concerned, the Church requires that our consciences be formed after having sincerely, seriously, respectfully and prayerfully taken into account the available moral sources, especially the moral source of the official magisterial teachings of the Church [cfr., *Dignitatis Humanae*, No:14; *Veritatis Splendor* No:64]. For moral truth is never merely

subjective (as we saw above), but also objective, especially when one considers the fact that we live in community/society with others. The etymology of the word 'conscience' itself corroborates this fact. The word "conscience" is derived from the Latin roots "con" and "scientia" which together would amount to mean "to know together" or "to know with". In the context of this paper, it would mean "to know the moral truth with others". In priestly life, of course, this would amount to forming a person's conscience within the particular community [diocese, presbytery or parish], and together with that community in accordance with the inherited particular customs/traditions, and also in accordance with the decisions taken in common.

In and through her teaching, thus, the Church guides us to avoid acting on our own [i.e., in isolation], to avoid subjectivism, and the inevitably ensuing relativism. When each and everyone hold onto and acts according to exclusive subjectivism, then, moral truth invariably becomes relative, and the world will become a bundle of moral chaos. This is precisely what Pope Benedict XVI said in his well-publicised address at the University of Regensburg, during his visit to Germany, in 2005:

*The subject then decides, on the basis of his experiences, what he considers tenable in matters of religion, and the subjective "conscience" becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical. In this way, though, ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter. This is a dangerous state of affairs for humanity....*

Today, there are also some even in priestly life who talk of doing what the individual priest thinks to be the right thing or desires to have/do, and even go to the extent of speaking of exclusive individual rights. The implication here is that such priests have individual rights as over and above their community [e.g., parish] obligations. This is a total distortion of what priestly commitment means, by definition itself. As Timothy Radcliffe points out [with regard to religious], on their day of Profession, the religious voluntarily surrender all their rights to the Congregation/Order

so that the common project of the Congregation/Order may be achieved together with others, in community. That is to say that in and through their Religious Profession, the religious relativize their individual rights and desires in order to absolutize the institute's projects within the *charism* proper to it. But with relativism, this is turned upside down! What Radcliffe says can be applied also to diocesan priestly life.

Since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, there has been a strong antipathy against and suspicion of all types of authority, especially against monarchic style of exercising authority which was common in the pre-modern era. This antipathy and skepticism against authority, are often directly transferred now also to priestly life. Hence, the prevalent sarcasm and open questioning/contesting of the legitimate authority even of their bishops by some priests, today!

Moreover, in our contemporary [post-modernist] cultures, democracy is upheld as a universal value, and as a result, equality of all humans is taken as an unquestionable value. This, too, has contributed to a false sense of an individual autonomy of priests [which is a subjective creation due to relativism in priestly life], today. Such a sense of an exaggerated and exclusive individual autonomy [as against the community which one is supposed to serve] quite often clashes even with the legitimate authority. While the role of a bishop/religious superior is to be understood today as a participatory authority [in the sense that the entire diocese/presbytery/community participates as far as possible in the decision-making], there are certain moments during which the final word rests with the legitimate authority: the bishop or the religious superior of the community [with regard to religious, this is explicitly mentioned in *Vita Consecrata*, No:43]. Unfortunately, today, an exaggerated sense of individualism [which is a direct result of subjective relativism] has often threatened even the legitimate authority of a bishop or a religious superior.

### 3. Commitment VS Job

Since according to the influences of relativism, a life-long commitment is erroneously perceived to be impossible, any task is taken as a mere job to be accomplished in the here and now. The influences of such relativistic secular beliefs on priestly life are manifested in many ways. The prevailing clamour among some priests/religious to blindly follow what the employees in secular jobs do, is the manifestation of this trend in priestly and consecrated life. Success at any cost, climbing the ecclesiastical ladder of status/positions, a sense of competition with other brother-priests, and popularity at any cost, are some of the repercussions. Accordingly, there seems to be no difference between a job and a vocation [a vocation or calling by God, in the case of priests!]. There are some priests who talk of retirement from priestly ministry, meaning by that 'retirement' not merely from the particular tasks assigned to him/her, but also from the duties of priestly life which he undertakes when he enters the sacred orders through the diaconate! Then, there are others who speak of self-fulfillment over and above the common project of the diocese!

When a life-long commitment is lacking, one cannot even think of sacrifice, self-denial,...etc. In fact, in Post-modern times, such words have become "bad words"! Only those 'feel-good' experiences or what would be of utility to the person, do matter. In priestly life, however, the terms 'priesthood' and 'being a victim' are inseparable; to be a priest is also to be a victim, just as Jesus, the High Priest was a victim. Catholic priesthood without offering oneself as a victim/sacrifice is hollow. And many a contemporary priest who complains of emptiness in their priestly life has this lack of a sacrificial life as the base of all his problems. In such a priestly life, due to the influence of relativism, sacrifices, if at all, are to be selected/chosen at one's own convenience at a time when one feels like making a sacrifice! It is not a life-long sacrificial offering to God. Consequently, one's priestly life itself becomes just one aspect of one's life, not the top-most priority of one's whole life for which one has made a life-long commitment.

On this particular point (with regard to consecrated life), Sandra Schneider has this to say:

*In a postmodern context with its extended life-expectancy, its array of options, its multiple relationships, and its ever-rising expectations, a perpetual commitment in which every aspect and element of one's being and life is integrated into a single whole seems to many people simply not possible. Such a person might consider the congregation an important or even, in principle, the primary organization, among many, to which she belongs but their commitment within and to it, and to Religious Life itself, is relative to their other commitments which may, at times have priority. In other words, for her, life commitment, the total commitment of one's life and to a life, belongs to a bygone era when things were simpler.*

This may hold good also for some diocesan priests too, as a result of the prevalent relativistic trends.

#### **4. Being VS Doing**

A necessary negative consequence of considering priestly life as a 'job' in our contemporary world is the craze to be 'work-aholics' and to acquire status! One's doing things have become more important than one's being [being called by God, and so, God's grace is at work, we are only instruments in His hands,...etc.]. Activity [achievements], today, has become so important that such basic essential elements like prayer, contemplation,...etc., are often substituted with loads of work! Human effort takes priority over any sense of God's grace. Unfortunately, often, such 'doings' or hyper-activism, is not based on one's spirituality ['being']. Rarely do such ordained priests ask the vital question: "Why am I doing the things that I am doing as an ordained priest?" Consequently, there seems to be a lack of a deep-seated spirituality, as such, in many priests today. It is of course a matter of doing the right things for the wrong reasons! When this happens, one loses the significance of one's existence as an ordained priest because one takes only one main aspect of

priestly life at the expense of the other aspect, or relativising the other aspect.

## **5. The Meaning of Priestly Promises**

The three vows in Consecrated Life are 'counter signs' to most of the secular trends that have come into the fore as a result of relativism [VC No: 87]. Thus, the vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience are 'counter signs' to the main fruits of contemporary Relativism, such as Hedonism, Materialism and a distortion of the concept of Freedom, known as 'Voluntarism' [ VC Nos. 88-91]. As VC No:87 says, vows relativize created goods and point to God as the Absolute Good. Although the diocesan priests do not take 'vows' as such, their priestly promises would also amount to leading a life that says "no" to all the above 'isms'! It is to be a life of witnessing that does not relativize any of the values inherent in the priestly commitment which are also the main Asian religious values of a truly religious person. That is precisely why Pope John Paul II could write in *Ecclesia in Asia*:

*People in Asia need to see the clergy not just as charity workers and institutional administrators, but as men whose minds and hearts are set on the deep things of the Spirit (cf. Rom.8:5). The reverence which the Asian peoples have for those in authority needs to be matched by a clear moral uprightness on the part of those with ministerial responsibilities in the Church. By their life of prayer, zealous service and exemplary conduct, the clergy witness powerfully to the Gospel in the communities which they shepherd in the name of Christ. [No: 43]*

## **6. Subjective, Personal Experience as the all-important Norm of Life**

When relativism has its sway, anything and everything becomes not only acceptable but also legitimate even in priestly life. A serious repercussion of such an eventuality is that some priests tend to create their own type of priestly life, according to their own conveniences, likes and dislikes, often, based on their personal experiences and individual feelings. Such 'creations' are

based on purely and exclusively subjective criteria. Accordingly, anything and everything in a given Diocese is made secondary to one's personal experiences.

It may not be out of place to cite here a few passages from the recent Report of a Superior General of a well-known religious Congregation:

*Over the last decades, as traditions and norms have lost their significance, a critical value has been assigned to personal experience and the capacity of each individual to encounter God. When filtered by subjective criteria, older practices and formulas no longer mediate a personally valid experience of God. This may help to explain the struggle local communities have in establishing a regular life of common prayer..... The unfamiliarity of the Constitutions and their apparently inconsequential role in much of the life of the Congregation deprives us of a common language as well as principles with which we can measure our lives and base our decisions.....*

*When a Province has to make choices regarding pastoral methods, develop expectations for community life or consider establishing or abandoning foundations, the debate is governed by beliefs, attitudes or opinions that may or may not have much of a connection with the values expressed in the Constitutions.*

In this first-hand experience of the Superior General, one needs to observe how subjective criteria have taken the upper hand in some of the members/communities of that particular Congregation. The obvious practical problem faced in such a situation where subjective criteria have taken priority over objective criteria [i.e., the *charism*, the Rule/ Constitutions of the Congregation], the crucial question is: whose subjective criteria are to be taken into consideration in making important decisions, for everybody will have his/her subjective criteria, fully independent of the Congregation's objective criteria [the *charism*, the Rule/Constitutions]? In other words, when "a common language" [i.e., objective criteria, as expressed in the *charism* and

the Rule] is missing in a community, how can that community make crucial decisions?

At a time when any human society's accumulated wisdom [i.e., wisdom passed on from the past, from one generation to the next] expressed in the form of traditions, customs, rules,...etc., is questioned as a reaction to the pre-Modernist over-emphasis on authority, subjectivism is bound to reign supreme. When such questionings affect also the accumulated wisdom of a local Church [expressed through the customs, traditions and common understanding/decisions of a diocese or of a presbytery], then, one faces the problematic situation expressed above by the above-mentioned Superior General, even in diocesan priestly life. This is a direct consequence of contemporary relativism.

## **Conclusion**

That today's world is already relishing in Post-modernist trends, particularly in relativism, is a given. In such a world, the faithful (especially the young) look up to Church leaders (especially, to priests) as "spiritual persons" who can boldly stand up and proclaim the values of the gospels as something worth believing. One main reason for the immense popularity of the late Pope John Paul II was that he could firmly say "this is right" and "this is wrong", without any hesitation. He was seen as someone who spoke with moral authority, and thus, he came out as a credible leader rather than as someone wavering in his teachings! This is one reason why the priests of today need to know their doctrine well, and hence the importance of a sound theological formation in the seminary. Today's priests, in other words, need to be well-versed at least in the basic tenets of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The Church's remedy to relativism is to emphasize the need to put our individual subjective moral judgments [i.e., moral judgments of the conscience] into an on-going dialogue with the objective moral norms, especially, with those proposed by the Church [i.e., magisterial teachings]. In other words, the Church invites us, as

conscientious believers, to always sincerely and respectfully measure our subjective moral judgments against the objective moral teachings of the Church [which is 'a common reference point'], before we come to our final moral discernment and put them into practice. The Church invites us to follow *the via media* between subjective relativism and objective absolutism in our Christian lives. For both subjective relativism and objective absolutism are extremes to be carefully avoided, by a conscientious Christian, especially by an ordained priest. A priest as the Church's official representative is the one, who in fact, should assist others to swim against the contemporary currents of Post-modernism, such as relativism. First of all, he needs to be a spiritual person with firm gospel convictions. Secondly, he needs to avoid excessive isolation from community (both the community of the presbytery as well as the community of the lay faithful), and fully get involved in communal activities in harmony with the other brother-priests and lay believers, headed by the bishop. In other words, a priest today needs to be related in two ways to avoid harmful effects of relativism: with God [vertical] and with others [horizontal].

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### **III. HEALTHY PSYCHOSEXUAL DEVELOPMENT FOR A HEALTHY CELIBATE LIFE**

*- Fr. Lawrence Pinto, MSIJ*

#### ***Living Healthy Celibate Life Leads to Psychosexual Well-Being***

##### **I. Introduction**

Listening to people—lay men and women, religious men and women, diocesan priests and seminarians/formees, over a period of time, one comes to an understanding of human sexuality as both the most graced and wounded area of our lives. For some the wound is much more pronounced, for others the grace becomes more evident. Yet both are generally part of the mosaic of our psychosexual narrative. Healthy sexuality within a Christian anthropology must deal with who we are, and how we relate to God as we move on our psychosexual journey. In other words, healthy and holy sexuality is rooted in our Christian understanding of the human person.

Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The image of God is a doctrine that isn't exactly clear-cut, mainly because it's never fully described in Scripture. Most Theologians, however, define the *Imago Dei* (Latin version "Image of God") as the human capability to reason, have heightened sense of emotions, understand morality, desire to create, and enjoy

aesthetics. All animals rely on nature in order to survive, humans seek to control nature and shape nature to serve humans. This is done because we are rational beings—most orthodox theologians believe this comes from being made in the image of God. Belief in the *Imago Dei* has far-reaching ramifications, the first of which is that human essence precedes human existence. If created by God in His Image, this means certain human traits—rationality, emotions and moral—existed prior to human existence. They were in God’s nature and the way they would play out in humanity was in His mind. This means our essence was in God’s plan, and that our essence preceded our existence.

Genesis 1:26-28 state that humans (both male and female) were made in the image of God which indicates the image does not have to do with physicality, but instead with our essence. Scripture, though it does not go into detail what exactly the image of God means, does state that even after the Fall, we are still in God’s image. It also seems to state that humans are significant regardless of their eternal state, because of this image. It is, therefore, in and through that image that we are called to live our sacred gift of sexuality in a way that honours self, others and God (McClone, 2004). This will involve a growing appreciation for both the positive and destructive aspects of our sexual nature, and what we like to refer to as the grace and the wound of our sexuality.

This psychosexual journey begins with a growing self-knowledge and acceptance which leads us to a more secure self-identity. This self-identity is further enhanced by a growing acceptance of the fullness of our sexual selves that allows us to risk authentic intimacy with others and God. Each stage of this journey, (we do not necessarily mean here the psychosexual stages expounded by Sigmund Freud, (1952) which brings new developmental challenges and sexual health, will demand attention to each particular life-cycle-challenge (McClone, 2004). Sexual health at childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life, and in older ages may appear quite different.

## **A. Healthy Sexuality involves the Whole Person**

Healthy sexuality must involve the whole person. Healthy sexuality must go beyond more popular secularized notions of sexuality that narrowly focus on genital sexuality. Any healthy sexuality from a Christian anthropological perspective then will need to address the whole person—body, heart, mind and spirit—within the context of all their relationships. As Christians, sexuality is a fundamental expression of who we are. It touches our core as individuals. When our sexual energy becomes properly channeled and directed, it can lead to generative acts of love and intimacy that builds the human community. Yet, when this same sexual energy gets entangled with our needs to cope with stress, to avoid pain, to manage our moods, to handle our relationships or to protect a fragile ego, we end up using sexual energy more instinctively and at times more compulsively or addictively. Let us now briefly discuss three aspects of the whole person: Body, Heart, Mind and Spirit.

### **1. Body**

The body with feelings, urges and longings is a place of divine revelation rather than something to be feared or an object of shame. In the flesh we meet God (Incarnation), in our bodies the power of God stirs; our sexuality is an ordinary medium through which God's love moves to touch, to create, to heal (Whitehead, 2001). Unfortunately, for many persons who have been wounded through past hurts in relationships, including sexual abuse, the result is often sexual shame or discomfort with one's physical body.

### **2. Heart**

Sexual health as it relates to the heart implies embracing the whole range of feelings and emotions that we have as embodied persons. Growing in emotional and affective maturity means that we cultivate openness to others in mutual respect and a growing willingness to develop skills of self-disclosure, listening and

empathy. Healthy sexuality involves becoming more aware of the movement of our desires, passions and longings as energy to attend to discernment. Healthy sexuality will also involve a growing capacity to develop friendships at a variety of levels with same-age peers. This implies that no one or two people will be able to meet all our emotional or relational needs.

### **3. Mind and Spirit**

It is said that one of the most underdeveloped sexual organs is the brain. Problems often arise in the sexual sphere of our lives either because we think too little about our sexuality or are preoccupied far too much with it. Either extreme can easily lead to ill health in the area of sexuality. On the one end, anxiety and fear of sexuality leads to avoidance of closeness with others (asexuality), and at the other end, it can lead to acting out impulsively (hypersexuality) out of anxiety, fear or shame. Healthy sexuality seeks to avoid these two extremes by fostering a more balanced style of relating that reflects deeper integration of body, heart, mind and spirit.

In the cognitive dimension of our sexuality, we are challenged to examine our real thoughts, perceptions and misperceptions about sexuality. As we grow we are expected to become more honest and comfortable with our attractions, longings, and intimacy struggles. We need to look at them with a genuine concern for the spiritual good of ourselves and the other or to look at them as more of the need-seeking instinctual kind where we seek to lose ourselves in the other! (McClone, 2011) In short, we need to find ourselves as persons who can share honestly our struggles of intimacy.

#### **B. Avoiding Dualism**

Healthy sexuality implies avoiding the sexual dualism that has marked much of the Christian tradition. Dualism is the false perception that spirit is opposed to body, with spirit assumed to be higher and superior, and the body lower and inferior. Thanks

to modern theological and psychological understanding which holds both sexes are equal in every respect as God created man – male and female (Genesis 1/27). Healthy sexuality will involve a growing capacity to relate with both men and women in more genuine and collaborative ways, and to appreciate the masculine and feminine dimensions within each of us as true gifts.

### **C. An Interrelated Whole**

All the dimensions of healthy sexuality are interrelated. If a person has not resolved certain sexual issues, like past sexual wounds or trauma, consequently the arrest of psychosexual growth, it will affect all other dimensions in some ways. Wholeness and holiness derive from the same root, and healthy sexuality calls us to the best of both. When all dimensions of one's sexuality are growing, one is becoming more loving in the way God calls one to be. More positively, if a person is sexually healthy in one dimension there can be a positive impact on the other areas. Relational intimacy with a close friend makes it less likely that a person will look for unhealthy ways to meet his unmet needs of intimacy.

### **D. Human Formation of Priests**

Priests/Religious are, first of all, human beings whose very humanity ought to be a bridge for communicating Jesus Christ to the world today. The human formation of priests/religious becomes the necessary tool for our healthy psychosexual development, and consequently, our healthy celibate life. All detailed processes of human formation are not discussed here, but what the human formation does to a seminarian is presented here. Human formation fosters the seminarian's growth as: a. a man of freedom, of solid moral character, of communion, of freedom and discernment, of affective maturity, of physical fitness, a man of good communication, a good steward and a public person.

If a seminarian achieves all those aspects of a 'priest-to-be' during his human formation while in the seminary, he will have attained a healthy psychosexual development. However, we need to scan through an overview of the phenomenon of psychosexual development, and explore how a priest would fail in living his celibate life if he did not attain a healthy degree of psychosexual development both in his early life in the family, in the seminary and in his priestly life.

We further discuss here below how the living of a healthy Celibate life would maintain the psychosexual well-being of the priest.

## **II. Living Healthy Celibate Life leads to Psychosexual Well-Being**

A life without sex makes little sense if living chastity/celibacy is not understood in all of its depth and breadth. Choosing to be chaste and celibate, priests profess that their way of life can be a pathway to God. And yet exploring the connection between this aspiration and its reality today is a complicated question. In a recent conversation with priests, Pope Benedict XV clearly affirmed the value of priestly celibacy as "a 'great reminder' of the priest's total gift of himself to God and to others (Allen, 2008). His words echo the Church's understanding of chastity/celibacy as "a contemplative love that includes all human beings and makes the priest open and able to find God everywhere (St. Louis Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995). Against this understanding of celibacy and chastity as unique ways of loving God and neighbor in the world, others have argued that the Church's celibacy requirement has contributed to the sex abuse crisis (Robinson, 2008). As evidence of much-publicized clergy sexual misconduct has emerged, some commentators have even argued that priestly celibacy and religious chastity now appear to be a destructive way of life.

Voices in the media and mental health profession unsettle us. Some, for instance, predict that sexual acting out and other forms

of reckless self-destructive behavior will be the inevitable result of a fundamentally dysfunctional lifestyle and dysfunctional church (Adams, 2003). Others suspect that the root of the problem lies deeply within us – that we have chosen celibacy and religious chastity because we ourselves are dysfunctional, hiding our own fears of sexual and interpersonal intimacy in the guise of a religious vocation and priestly ministry.

To negotiate with such suspicions about celibacy and religious chastity remains an important challenge for us today. Some believe we can and must address the aforesaid issues regarding celibate life by ourselves. Otherwise, it will be impossible for us to explain these issues to others – especially to a curious public or more importantly to someone who is interested in becoming a priest or entering religious life. If we fail to attend to these significant matters about our psychosexual health, we risk further damaging a gift that God has given the Church for centuries and which we, now, in these challenging times have been invited to embrace.

It can be wholeheartedly believed that priests/religious living healthy chaste or celibate lives can embody psychosexual well-being. Chastity and celibacy cannot be understood solely from the viewpoint of what is given up, a life without sex or marriage. Priests need to understand how we actively engage in living chastity/celibacy and promote psychosexual well-being as a gift of our vocation (Manuel, 2012). Having been involved in active practices of religious/priestly life, priests would promote their own psychosexual health. These practices together include a range of experiential dimensions which will help priests to assess themselves. The above can be discussed under five sub-headings:

1. The Closeness with God must be the Deepest Desire of Priests/Religious
2. Priests/Religious must develop broad and deep interpersonal relationships and enjoy community Support

3. Priests/Religious must seek to love, nurture others and enjoy some independence
4. Priests/Religious must be able to cope with stress and be aware of destructive patterns of behaviours in them
5. Priests/Religious must learn to enjoy the Holy Company of Jesus

Attention to these experiential dimensions of living chastity/ celibacy is especially timely. While in recent years there has been heightened interest in the relationship between psychological dysfunction and clergy sexual misconduct, there has been little commentary on the positive aspects— psychological, social, and spiritual—of living chaste and celibate life and how such a lifestyle can promote the overall health of our vocation and enhance the effectiveness of our ministry(Manuel, 2010). To protect ourselves and even more importantly the people we serve, we have focused almost exclusively on studying various aspects of the ‘sexual abuse crisis’ especially its scope, demographics, causes, and treatment [Plante, (ed.) 1999].

The above proposed five dimensions are not a theology of chastity; nor do they explain why one chooses chastity and celibacy. Rather they describe how chastity/ celibacy is experienced and enacted, what some of the opportunities and struggles might be there, and how our experience of chastity/ celibacy can enrich our priestly life and ministry. We can use literary and life-examples to illustrate various aspects of these experiential dimensions and how they so often frame both our vulnerability and God’s grace.

### **1. The Closeness with God must be the Deepest Desire of Priests/Religious**

We have our own stories to speak about our lives. Our stories shape our emotions, thoughts, perceptions and relationships with our friends, confreres, and the people we serve. The truth lies not in the facts of our stories but in the longings that set them in

motion (Johnson, 1993). Through the highs and lows of our vocational history, our deepest longings unfold. We choose this life and somehow abandon what seems impossible to give up as we try to understand the ebb and flow of our desires and longings over time.

When psychologists meet with couples in counseling, whether they are working through a marriage crisis or more ordinary conflicts, they often begin by asking the couple to tell them how they fell in love. They observe how easily and comfortably couples confide their stories, what longings are expressed in the narratives, and what feelings are conveyed as they tell their story here and now. Psychologists explore what the couples long for and desire from, or for, one another today. Even when marriages are in crisis because of infidelity, the heart of the story remains what has happened and what is happening in their primary relationship with one another. The power of their personal narrative can often support the couple in times of crisis and conflict.

When priests assess personal psychosexual well-being, especially with respect to their celibate and chaste lifestyles, their efforts can parallel much of what psychologists ask couples about marriage. We begin by reviewing the story of our own primary relationship, that is, our relationship to God because our psychosexual well-being depends most of all on the health of this primary bond. Recall for a moment your own vocation story. For most of us, it usually begins with a powerful longing for God. Over time and through every dimension of our personal, communal, and apostolic life, priests are called “to reverence the divine presence as the horizon in which they live, to apprehend the immanent providence of God that draws them into its own working for the salvation of human beings, and to hold onto God as the purpose that energizes their work—learning thus to find God in all things (Manuel, 2010).

There are volumes written on the topic of spirituality and how priests and religious might experience “familiarity with God.”

Some writers initially frame the relationship from the perspective of our longing for God while others view it from the perspective of God's longing for us (Rolheiser, 1999, Barry, 2008) For the celibate, such familiarity and mutuality in one's relationship with God is especially crucial. Moreover, just as assessing mutuality in a marital relationship can be complicated and carefully nuanced; one's intimacy with God can be multilayered as it unfolds over the various stages of priestly life. As in a marriage, the story of the priest's relationship to God is likely to be a narrative of highs and lows that over time can be marked by a growing congruence, harmony, and trust. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for religious women and men/priests to go through periods like a "dark night" when God seems less accessible, silent, or even absent. Psychosexual well-being in priestly/religious life will depend on the priest's discerning the meaning of these highs and lows. He asks "Where is God?" and "What does God want?" amidst the changing circumstances of his/her life.

The ways priests rely on God can be simple and sublime. An aging priest once explained how he found God at the beginning of each day. As he struggled daily with his own doubts, aches and pains, he would have never considered himself a holy man though others did. During his battle with cancer in the last years of his life, he said that he did not have the patience or strength to pray. But he explained that every morning when he struggled to get out of bed, he would raise his hand toward heaven and ask God for a lift. That simple gesture tells us everything we need know about how he expressed his familiarity with God and found God mutually reaching out for him (Manuel, 2010).

## **2. Priests/Religious must develop broad and deep interpersonal relationships and enjoy community Support**

While God is at the center of our promise to live as celibates, the gift of chastity/celibacy is also meant to promote our interpersonal relationships. Although we are not committed to an exclusive romantic partnership nor are we responsible for a

family, we do have the opportunity to develop relationships greater in breadth and number and more unique in intimacy and depth than many married people enjoy. Priests must remember that the pathway to God is often discovered through our human interactions. As the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1965) writes, "Creatures are placed in my way so that I, their fellow-creature, by means of them, and with them, find the way to God." As celibates, we are not only open to close and intimate connection with others within appropriate boundaries, but over time we will depend on the quality of these relationships to enhance our psychosexual health and maturity as chaste religious/priests.

To achieve this psychosexual health requires that we transcend the sexual myths of our day. In this era of Viagra and other performance enhancing medications, for instance, popular culture often reduces psychosexual well-being to sexual function. It is not surprising that the most immediate question raised by the media about celibacy and chastity is how the simple lack of sex might affect us. However, genital contact does not guarantee intimacy. Psychological literature has long emphasized the importance of interpersonal socialization over 'function' as the critical component in psychosexual well-being. Sexual desire represents the need for intimacy and not simply genital satisfaction. Rollo May (1969) concludes: "For human beings, the more powerful need is not for sex per se, but for relationships, for intimacy, acceptance and affirmation." These interpersonal dimensions of socialization play the critical role in our psychosexual development and are available to us within the limits of celibacy.

Addressing the place of relationships in our lives is the first step toward constructing our psychosexual identity. Contemporary psychoanalytic literature explains how the meanings associated with these interactions constitute the core of our psychosexual identity...human sexuality is indeed psychosexuality. The concept psychosexuality excludes a sexuality of blind instincts culminating in propagation of the species, as in non-human

organisms (though even for them this simple statement is no longer really acceptable); and it excludes a sexuality simply of erotic techniques and orgasmic adequacy. Psychosexuality means mental sexuality, that is, a sexuality of meanings and personal relationships that have developed and been organized around real and imagined experiences and situations in a social world (Schafer, 1974).

True to this understanding of psychosexuality, our Catholic faith tradition at the heart of our religious/priestly commitment considers our interpersonal relationships and personal communities not only as sources of support but also as embodiments of the reality of God in our lives. Friendships can not only support a life of dedicated chastity/celebrity but can also deepen the affective relationship with God that chastity embodies. Such a network of relationships provides us with the intimacy and friendship we need to thrive psychologically and spiritually. As the writer Gregory Wolfe (2008-9) observes, "The effort to be fully human cannot ultimately be undertaken in solitude." Jon Fuller (2001) describes how the understanding of friendships in priestly life has evolved. He explains that rather than thinking particular friendships threaten our work, we have realized that unless we have healthy particular friendships, individuals with whom we have an especially deep and mutual bond, we won't be able to manage the stressors of growing old as we give ourselves to the works of the Church. Jon Fuller (2001) concludes:

"We seem to have learned that the crisis of intimacy which often characterized the decision by some to leave religious/priestly life can be most effectively countered not simply by having fraternal relationships with all, but by cultivating close friendships, both inside and outside the presbyterium/religious community in which we can know and be known, and in which with freedom and trust we can voice our fears, concerns, temptations, and aspirations."

The role of relationships can be addressed more generally but for them to be truly illuminating, we should also examine them from the very concrete perspective of how they help and support us. There should be someone who listens to the highs and lows of any given week or month of his life. His parish community (priests and people) should be a home where he can find rest and day-to-day support, understanding fellowship as well as challenge. He will want the option of spending holidays and extended vacation times in the company of others/or priest companions.

When struggling with personal difficulties or illness, the priest will need to share his concerns with family, friends, and community. In the course of ministry, there are inevitable setbacks—being passed over for a promotion or new assignment, a rejected article or book, an unjust or stinging performance evaluation, an illness, disability, and diminishment. Imagine the impact of these setbacks on morale and self-esteem if there is no one with whom to share the experience of defeat, shame, or loss and from whom one can receive solace and support. In these circumstances, injuries of self-fester and we can become bitter and withdrawn. Similarly, without someone to share our joys and successes, even peak experiences can become hollow and meaningless. We need people with whom we can celebrate important achievements and milestones. Success in cultivating lasting relationships and communities of support assumes healthy honest communication. Like all communication, what we convey to others about ourselves as priests and vowed religious must be supported with responsibility and integrity.

The sex abuse crisis has made clear that we put others at risk when we are not clear with ourselves that some service we are providing—pastoral ministry, teaching, guiding, counseling, spiritual direction—has become more about meeting our own needs for intimacy. We must be vigilant with ourselves and other community members when we are aware of one-sided relationships that seem to be driven by the need for personal gratification. In these situations, our “inner inclinations,

passions, anxieties, and emotions” should be brought into the light and directed toward healing and transparency in venues that do not endanger those we are entrusted to serve. Moreover, the role we play in these “helping” relationships wields power and influence that need to be critically examined at every stage.

On the other hand, we also experience select relationships that naturally evolve into lasting friendships over time. These close associations succeed because they enjoy mutually constructed meaning, clear expectations, and reciprocity that have grown out of sharing time and common activities appropriate to each stage of development. Most importantly, these friendships reflect a healthy sense of self that includes not only an awareness of our own needs, but a respect for the needs of the other as the relationship deepens and matures.

Many priests enjoy growing friendships with colleagues, students, parishioners, couples, and families. In the ordinary span of priestly ministry, it is not uncommon for a priest to marry a couple, baptize their children, perhaps even celebrate the funeral of the couple’s parents, and later preside at their child’s wedding. Through such milestones, he becomes a part of their extended family. Similarly, as students graduate and mature, they fondly remember the priests/teachers who made a difference in their lives, and often claim them as lifelong friends.

Typically, the intimate relationships that populate a priest’s life are quite varied—seminary classmates, close friends, lay colleagues, parishioners, and students. In all of these varied relationships, the priest is called to love in a way that is true to his vow of celibacy. Priests will express and receive affection through a variety of gestures that include terms of endearment and tender moments of touch and embrace. Since the priest’s love is not exclusive, however, he must carefully discern what gestures and words express to others both his love for them and his fidelity to his priestly commitment. He should be vigilant that these gestures are received and understood as they are intended. When sexual feelings emerge, he needs to

acknowledge them to himself and carefully discern their meaning and intent so that he doesn't hurt others, himself, or the Church by unreflective sexual acting out.

In the priest's efforts to love with integrity, the ways he communicates his affection and what he promises in friendship should be supported by his life of celibacy and obedience and by the demands of his diocese/congregation and apostolic life. Respecting boundaries in one's love-relationships can be a profound way of loving another, an invitation to others to a shared experience of God and his parish/religious community. To understand psychosexuality in celibacy and religious chastity, we must explore how God and lasting love contribute to more expansive meaning in our interpersonal relationships and communities of support. As the US Bishops' Guidelines (2010) for the liturgy remind us:

"We do not come to meet Christ as if he were absent from the rest of our lives. We come together to deepen our awareness of, and commitment to, the action of his Spirit in the whole of our lives at every moment. We come together to acknowledge the love of God poured out among us in the work of the Spirit, to stand in awe and praise." Our more powerful need is not for sex but for loving interpersonal and communal relationships that do not come to an end but extend into eternity. As celibates and religious, we hope love will always be with us. Our psychosexual well-being is ultimately tied to our faith and spirituality.

### **3. Priests/Religious must seek to receive/give love, nurture others and enjoy some independence**

**"Do you love me?" (John 21:15)**

Once a priest narrated a story of how he accompanied his mother through the ravages of advanced dementia and the final stages of her life. During those days when he saw that his mother would not live much longer with him, he wanted to find out how much his mother loved him. Sitting at her bedside in what he

considered a playful moment, he asked “Mom, do you love me?” To his surprise, she answered clearly, “Yes, I love you!” And so he asked, “How much do you love me?” And raising her hands and arms in a wide outreaching gesture, she replied “I love you as much as could be in the world!”

Healthy interpersonal and sexual development requires that we learn how to ask the question this priest posed to his mother – “Do you love me?” At significant moments throughout the span of our lives, priests and religious will need to ask God and the people of God “Do you love me?” because it is both the nature of human development and a core tenet of our faith that we are loved first. “We love because God first loved us” (1Jn 4:19). Celibacy and chastity can breed an unhealthy self-sufficiency when community/presbyterium members ask for help from one another or others only in extreme circumstances if at all. Not infrequently, priests do not develop the capacity for asking for another’s care, even in small ways. If we cannot ask for assistance from the diocesan community or friends for small favors, a ride to the airport or company for dinner and a show, we certainly can’t impose on them during times of dire need, transport to the hospital in the middle of the night, or assistance when we are unable to care for ourselves. And so, we put ourselves at risk of constructing a life of considerable loneliness and isolation.

Friendship in the presbyterium/religious community should offer priests the opportunity to develop a range of relationships that communicate varying levels of intimacy and trust, including some that might approximate the intense friendship between Jesus and the disciples. Where do we find the strength to be so vulnerable as to ask for the help and love we need from one another, family, friends, and extended community? Perhaps we can find courage from the pastoral conversations we’ve experienced throughout the years, from others who found the courage to voice these concerns to us. Just as parents, children, spouses, and friends seek reassurance from one another that their love is understood and taken seriously, so also priests and

religious need reassurance about their love. Love is a gift and so too our freedom to ask for love. In our unique circumstances, our well-being depends on growing confidence that we are loved by God and others and that we can continue to hope for as much love in our lives as possible.

Even after his resurrection Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” Three times Jesus asks because he knows just how much Peter needs to be healed and that such healing would only come by Peter’s engaging in this question. Like Peter, in our prayer we can also imagine ourselves hearing Jesus say to us “Do you love me?” And like Peter, we probably also respond, “Yes; yes of course; yes, don’t you know?” But Jesus knows he must pose the question again and again. He isn’t embarrassed to ask and with persistence and patience invites Peter and all of us into a new life of engagement—“Feed my lambs.” So too, when we say “yes” to Jesus or to someone else who asks for our love, we likely do not grasp immediately what this yes entails, and how this commitment can transform us. Over and over again, we search for the love that can sustain us not only in the ordinary moments of our lives but especially at times of crisis.

When those crises come, our well-being could depend on how well we have learned to ask others “Do you love me?” Such moments of crisis also offer important opportunities. As the novelist John L’Heureux (1999) reminds us, “God sanctifies us—he makes us saints—in his own way. Not in our way. It never looks like sanctity to us. It looks like madness, or failure, or even sin.” Precisely when we feel as if we have failed or sinned terribly, the same Jesus who transformed the once wayward Peter enters our lives in the most unexpected ways and heals us in our darkness. For “sometimes, in that darkness, there is a single act of love, some selfless gesture, an aspiration, and we see that it’s not been all waste, all hopeless, and we can ... well ... go on”(Heureux, 1999).

“Do you love me?” is the foundational question of our human development, our psychosexual well-being, and our spirituality.

We priests readily acknowledge “we are sinners called by God.” As a priest explained to me, “In my life my vocation is God’s greatest act of mercy.” And yet what we are less ready to confess is that the question “Do you love me?” It is the one question that we never outgrow. We imagine we are beyond such a need of asking for love in our lives as priests. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” (Hebrews 4:12-16)

### **“Feed my lambs.” (John 21:15)**

We are called to see and love the world as Jesus did. The interpersonal dialogue between Jesus and Peter also reflects the dialogue between us and a world that hopes for our love in return. Like all of us, the poor, the hungry, the oppressed ask directly and obliquely—“Do you love me?” Through them the Lord is inviting us to engage the world in justice and love. When we have the courage to say “yes” to the struggles of the world, we discover that its suffering lives not so much outside of us as within our own hearts. When we heal the loneliness and pain of others, we also heal our own. The commission of Jesus to Peter—“Feed my lambs”—tells us what we most need to remember about our ministry. Chaste and celibate love needs to respond in order to find itself whole. Jesus instructs us that the meaning of our lives is about nurturing one another, that love cannot be complete in a vacuum. And following Christ, our love is not about our own gratification but rather responding more and more to those in greatest need just as Jesus did when he responded to our need for love. And the love we offer others is the love we have received.

Our psychosexual well-being will be reflected in our work for others and in how we manage the attachments that we form along the way. A priest understands that “a total investment of love and the pain of letting go are part of what a religious/priest’s vocation is all about and is different from more

typical understandings of love.” The anguish that we experience is not a sign that our attempts to love have failed but rather that “we have, in fact, succeeded.” This poignant and insightful description of how priests love others “with great emotion and depth” while still being ready to “move on when the time comes” applies not only to these first apostolic experiences in priestly formation but hopefully to the growing network of interpersonal relations and communities of support that a seminarian moves through in the course of his evolving ministry as a priest.

### **“Follow me.” (John 21:19)**

The capacity both to develop loving attachments and to separate from them is critical to psychosexual development for everyone and most especially for those whose lifestyle requires distance and separation from loved ones. As psychologists who study psychosexual development explain, inherent in our experience of love throughout the life span is the negotiation between two great human longings (Kegan, 1982). One is the longing to merge with others—to be a part of, joined with, close to, held, and accompanied. The other is the longing to be separate— independent, autonomous, apart— to be my own person. Our social and interpersonal life is experienced as the variable tension between the longing to merge and the longing to separate. Making love is the typical example of merging with another while delighting in the other’s separateness; the fascination with the other is that the other is not me but somehow merged with me. Even in relationships where our sexual feelings are not primary, the intimate attachments of our lives will reflect this tension of loving, holding on, and letting go.

To negotiate this delicate balance throughout one’s life span requires great care. As children, we begin to merge at home with parents but soon separate from them and turn to significant others and many in our human environment, namely, our school peers, close friends, first loves, life partners, professional groups, presbyterium, religious communities, and the world at large. Early intimate relationships prepare us for future ones of greater

complexity, breadth and depth. While these longings might appear to be in conflict with one another, they are meant to be harmoniously related to one another. In every significant relationship, there are very real ways we merge with and depend on the other. At the same time there are also very real ways that we internalize relationships and move on.

How successfully or unsuccessfully this balance is negotiated before one enters religious/priestly life and ministry will certainly impact one's ability to engage in interpersonal relationships. One might imagine that people who enjoy connection with others would be drawn to religious /priestly life and ministry because of the attractiveness of community life (Presbyterium) and a sense of oneness with the people of God. On the other hand, those who prefer separateness could be attracted to religious/priestly life and ministry because of the contemplative nature and solitude of this spiritual lifestyle. Mature psychosexual well-being assumes a reasonable balance in both yearnings, and ideally men who enter priestly or religious life and ministry are capable of achieving this balance.

Moreover, continuing psychosexual development in religious/priestly life and ministry will depend on how successfully interpersonal relationships are established and internalized while allowing for the separateness and mobility that are inherent in our apostolic life. Each separation in religious/priestly life prepares the way for the next with the possibility that our unresolved or bitter feelings will carry over as well. It is not surprising that the first vocation crisis in religious/priestly formation often centers around the realization that apostolic life and openness to mission can entail painful separation from people we have grown to love and necessitate establishing fresh relationships in their place as we move to a new assignment at a distant parish, school, or community. Another ongoing challenge is the departure of cherished companions from our communities, a loss that leaves us feeling abandoned and alone. These various separations foreshadow as well the ultimate challenge of coping with the death of family,

loved ones, and even our own death. In the very real struggle between merger and separation, spiritual and psychosexual well-being intersects in priestly/religious life.

In these moments, we recall Jesus asking not only “Do you love me?” but also his caution “When you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go.” (John 21:18) This warning can help us trust that Jesus understands the painful reality of separation. In our solitude, we can also hear Jesus inviting “Follow me.” And our “Yes, Lord, you know I love you” takes on a poignancy and depth we had not initially anticipated.

As one writer explains, “The sexual life of a celibate person is going to manifest itself primarily in the affective bonds of permanent and steadfast human friendships which are exemplifications of God’s way of loving” (Goergen, 1974). And yet our relationships are formed by respecting the boundaries of living chaste and celibate, which often include the painful challenge of distance from those we love. Solitude can point us toward God. And so, we learn to rely upon spiritual practices like prayer and liturgy, also expressions of God’s way of loving, as our way of holding on to these cherished relationships in God’s presence and directing God’s providence to those we love. In God and with God’s grace, we express our gratitude and voice our concerns for the permanence and steadfastness of these relationships.

#### **4. Priests/Religious must be able to cope with stress and be aware of destructive patterns of behaviours in them**

An important part of any person’s journey is coping with stress, especially if it is understood in its broadest and most human terms. Stress is strain, frustration, suffering, anger, pain, sadness, distress, anxiety, worry, and/or depression in all of its various manifestations and combinations. Despite its ever presence in our lives, stress can be difficult to identify. To get at its source, we can ask ourselves “What worries us?” or even more

to the point “What has hurt us?” What hurts or worries us becomes apparent in a variety of ways (Manuel, 2010). Behaviorally, we might turn to alcohol, drugs, food, or sex for solace and comfort. We can become lethargic and withdrawn or desperately reckless. Physical manifestations might include anxiety, arousal, sleeplessness, and exhaustion; we can find ourselves prone to recurring somatic illnesses, mysterious viral maladies, flu and flu-like symptoms, and even accident proneness. Cognitively, we might be preoccupied with rigid and obsessive thoughts and ruminations. Our worries and hurt bend our backs and burden our hearts. The stress we experience has the potential to significantly impair our lives.

As celibates and priests/religious, our stress may be compounded by the particular circumstances of our religious/priestly life and ministry. Sometimes one wonders whether one is simply going through the emotions, especially at liturgy where his homilies have lost their freshness and edge. We are encouraged not to be afraid to explore the depths of our malaise, carefully weigh all our options, and find the path to restoring our hope, we realize we should listen to our own advice. Like dissatisfaction in a marriage, stress in celibate and religious/priestly life can grow out of ambivalence towards the lifestyle itself and feelings of being trapped in circumstances that seem impossible to change.

Celibacy was once perceived as promoting one’s relationship to God, encouraging greater freedom and availability in pastoral work, building broad and deep loving relationships, facilitating prophetic advocacy in social justice, or reflecting the power and fidelity of God’s relationship to the human community. But now it may be experienced as overwhelming deprivation. This mental attitude leads to deepening feelings of helplessness and hopelessness within religious/priestly life. As several observers have noted, when one cannot acknowledge deeply felt sexual frustration, “sexuality takes on a life of its own, unreal and fantasy driven (Cloud & Townsend, 1992). Moreover, “Unmet needs, denial, pain—in short, the personal things that are

unpleasant to deal with—get buried. Unfortunately, they do not fade, they fester (Hemfelt, Minirth & Meir, 1989). And over time, one's sexuality and sexual behavior becomes dissociated. Adams (2003) explains:

“Since sexuality does not become integrated in the priest's identity, sexual impulses are now strewn with feelings of resentment, loss, and entitlement that produce a tension that leads to compulsive, and sometimes violating, discharge. Its expression is dissociated from the value system of the moral, governing self.”

Finally, such perceived deprivation, deepening helplessness, and unacknowledged turmoil make one prone to sexual misconduct, looking for identity and healing through sexual contact (Nelson, 2003). When one feels trapped in any commitment, whether in marriage or in religious/priestly life, one is easily prone to consciously or unconsciously absolving oneself from the responsibility for straying from fidelity to that commitment. Just as the choice to remain faithful is not ours neither is the choice to stray. It's not surprising then to witness what so often seems patently reckless and scandalous behavior among people who have affairs or engage in other self-destructive activities as we've observed over and over again in well known political figures as well as clergy.

Repression and denial of conflicts involving celibacy/chastity promote feelings of guilt and generate dissatisfaction with/priestly/religious life and ministry. In the wake of the sex abuse scandals, one psychologist highlights the extraordinary contradiction of this unhealthy cycle:

“...just as food addicts will purge after overeating, people can binge sexually and then purge by sexual self-hatred. The denial of sensual feelings, however, ends up strengthening them; it is out of this that the binge-purge cycle grows. An example of this is a pastor who preaches against pornography and infidelity, only to end up being involved in a huge scandal due to his sexual

behavior. These people feel a tremendous amount of shame and struggle with accepting God's love for them, sensing that God has forgiven others but not them" (Nelson, 2003).

By contrast, healthy celibacy and chastity promote the integration of the sexual and spiritual dimensions of a person's life and do not rely on the denial or repression of sexuality (Goergen, 1974). Whatever one's sexual orientation might be—heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual—one's sexual self and attractions need to be identified and embraced, loved and understood over and over again so that living chastity is a free and conscious choice. Writing on developing appropriate intervention strategies for priests and religious, Gregoire and Jungers (2003) emphasize the dynamism of celibacy means that it is a lived process, a choice that is made daily, time and again throughout a priest's life. Living chastity will entail reframing unhealthy perspectives on celibacy and time and again identifying the positive effects of living chaste and celibate.

An essential part of priestly ministry under the standard of the cross has been to expect suffering and to risk suffering ourselves. Today, a part of this suffering may well be collateral shame or damage from the sex abuse crisis. Most of us have felt considerable pain and humiliation in the past few years but our spiritual tradition offers considerable resources for enduring hardship. Our very vocation is a counter-cultural avoidance of a stress-free lifestyle and it encourages the kind of human growth that is marked by vulnerability, solidarity, and compassion as opposed to self-protection, self-promotion, and self-preservation.

In addition to coping with the stress related to our lifestyle and ministry, there are the usual varieties of ordinary life events that can burden us—personal illness or misfortune, interpersonal conflicts, family struggles, aging, and the death of loved ones. From time to time, friends, family, or the presbyterium/religious congregation will inevitably disappoint and even hurt us. And so, independently or cumulatively we can be stressed by our lifestyle, ministry, and ordinary life traumas and find ourselves

in pain and searching for solace. During these times of distress, we need to be especially vigilant that we do not use sex as a way of altering mood or as an escape. Along with other forms of gratification or socially isolating activities like extended television viewing, engaging in sexual fantasies, various forms of internet pornography, and sexually acting out can be ways of coping with sadness by medicating our pain and suffering (Nelson, 2003).

Rather, we need to be aware of what we would consider healthy self-solacing activities and other constructive coping strategies that relieve our suffering. An important first step would be to acknowledge our pain and share it with friends, members of our community, spiritual director, therapist, and God. We need to allow ourselves the opportunity to actively grieve our personal loss, disappointment, and failure and to find solace in activities that are deeply renewing and recreative. We should identify positive interactions that can counteract negative interactions in our lives, activities that provide us with the rest, relaxation, and renewal we need, and people with whom we want to share these activities.

## **5. Priests/Religious must learn to enjoy the Holy Company of Jesus**

Living celibate and chaste can promote both a deepening relationship with God and the people of God. Psychosexual well-being in priest's life is ultimately linked to spiritual development and its apostolic expression. From a very human and pastoral perspective, growing capacity for broad and deep relationships as well as the growing sensitivity and compassion to sustain them are invaluable supports to the priestly ministry of service and community building. And from a more explicitly spiritual perspective, these pastoral and personal relationships give us privileged insight into how God's people discover Christ's presence and love in their lived experience. We are able to journey with others and at their invitation often help them observe and name the grace that unfolds in their lives.

The experience of God in a life of celibacy and chastity finds powerful expression in our sacramental ministry and homiletics. Conversely, in the same sacraments we deepen our encounter with God and this mutual dynamic is just as it should be. As the US Bishops observe regarding liturgical celebrations: “People in love make signs of love, not only to express their love but also to deepen it. Love, never expressed, dies. Christians' love for Christ and for one another and Christians' faith in Christ and in one another must be expressed in the signs and symbols of celebration or they will die (Secretariat of Divine Worship, 2008). These signs and symbols have tremendous power and we are privileged to live in such close contact with the consolation they offer.

Called by God, we begin our religious/priestly lives longing to follow God faithfully. As we engage the people of God, over time we discover chastity/celibacy is God’s gracious gift. Together with obedience and celibacy, it enables us to be shaped in the Church into the image of Jesus himself; they also make clear and visible our availability for God’s call. Later as we cope with the distance and separation from loved ones that are inevitably part of our apostolic lives and celebrate the “signs and symbols” that promise a love that never ends, we discover the solace and comfort of God’s Spirit. Living celibacy, the priest experiences God at various times of his life in the person of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Together with their single, partnered, or married sisters and brothers, priests share the hope that their way of life can free them to love and be loved ever more fully in all the dimensions and persons of God.

### **III. Concluding Remarks**

Why choose to be chaste and celibate? How in the world could we do that to ourselves? It’s a long story but it begins with the desire and longing for God. It is about how that aspiration called us to come to know the people of God in ways we would have never imagined possible. In these relationships and communities of support, we have discovered again and again how God and

often the people of God love us first and how whatever love in life we receive and give back never seems to end, comforting and consoling us in solitude, suffering, and the quest to better our world (St. Ignatius of Loyola).

In conclusion, the human formation in the seminary/religious house must make a seminarian/formee a person who has fully grown in “self-awareness and sound personal identity,” which are hallmarks of a healthy personality which establishes a secure basis for the spiritual life. Such growth is demonstrated by the qualities of: openness and flexibility, joy and inner security, generosity and justice, personal maturity, interpersonal skills, common sense, moral character, aptitude for ministry, growth in moral sensibility and character. Besides, he must also develop and enjoy such personality characteristics as: sound prudential judgment, a sense of responsibility and personal initiative, a capacity for courageous and decisive leaderships and an ability to work in a collaborative, professional manner with both men and women, forgoing self-interests in favour of cooperative effort for the common good. May God bless our Bishops, priests, religious and our seminarians/formees with a healthy celibate life, which will enhance their psychosexual well-being, and a glorious pastoral ministry/religious work in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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