

# Janusz A. Ihnatowicz

---

## The celibate - an eschatological man

---

Collectanea Theologica 52/Fasciculus specialis, 115-120

---

1982

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

JANUSZ A. IHNATOWICZ

### THE CELIBATE — AN ESCHATOLOGICAL MAN

Staretz Amvrosy of Opino insisted that there were only two vocations, two states in life appropriate to a christian: marriage or monastery, for only those two counteracted man's selfishness: and he would have his spiritual children choose one or the other as soon as possible. Another eastern tradition goes even further: the only life proper for a christian is that of a monk; in its modern form it is a call for „interiorised monasticism”.<sup>1</sup> What the monastic life makes visible should be present in one form or another in the life of every christian. Be it as it may, it seems true that there are two states of life in the Church theologically well-defined and spiritually unambiguous, viz. marriage and dedicated celibacy.<sup>2</sup>

For priests of the Latin Rite marriage as a viable option is excluded by the will of the Church.<sup>3</sup> Does this mean that they should be monks? A strong case can be made for an intimate relationship between celibacy and monastic life; between foregoing marriage for the sake of the kingdom and seeking God alone. St. Augustine, St. Martin of Tours and many other advocates of common life of priests saw priesthood in this light.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term proposed by Paul Evdokimov, *The struggle with God*, Glen Rock: Paulist Press 1966.

<sup>2</sup> The term "dedicated celibacy" should be extended to all who for various reasons (sometimes even having little to do with religion) have chosen to remain unmarried, whatever their celibate life and service will take. Without this dedication most unmarried persons would at least be oriented towards marriage.

<sup>3</sup> We have no intention of involving ourselves here in the general controversy about compulsory celibacy. It is also true that married clergy is already a reality in the Latin Rite: deacons, by law, and few priests, by dispensation. Nor shall we attempt a general defence of priestly celibacy as such. But it should be remarked that in much of recent discussion four separate questions are not properly distinguished to the detriment of the whole argument: (1) religious value of celibate life as such in the church, (2) connection (if any) between priesthood and celibacy, (3) compulsory versus optional celibacy, (4) ordination of married men and marriage of those already ordained. Defenders of compulsory celibacy often seem to think that having shown that celibacy is a value (question 1) is to have proven the theological necessity of universal and compulsory celibacy (question 3). Opponents of compulsory celibacy often seem driven to claim that celibacy as such has no value and is inferior to marriage. Another methodological mistake.

We should not forget that, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us (PO n.16) celibacy is not demanded by the nature of the priesthood itself, however appropriate it might appear. Originally it was linked not with ministry, but with martyrdom; not with ecclesial office but with the witness of monasticism.

There is, however, a certain connaturality between priesthood and celibacy. That this belief is a part of the common catholic tradition is witnessed by the discipline of the eastern churches in their refusal of the episcopal ordination (i.e. fullness of priesthood) to married men. The respect that all churches give to celibate priest-monks is another witness of the same belief. Therefore whatever adjustments will have to be made in the contemporary discipline, the Church would be foolish unduly to downgrade or recklessly to abandon the witness of the celibate ministry under the pressure of to-day's objections and difficulties.

Celibacy of priests is not only the existential framework of their ministry, but is also a part of their theological *raison d'être*; it is not only a fact of ecclesiastical life, but a theological reality. Celibacy has to be considered, therefore, in its theological aspect, if it is to become not merely a canonical rule, but the spiritual foundation of a priest's life and ministry (and it is the expressed will of the church that it should, PO n.12).<sup>4</sup>

It is probably very true that celibacy as a human option needs no special defence, its human value and legitimacy has not been seriously questioned; it is precisely as a christian option that it is under attack, we should not, therefore, be afraid elaborate a theological treatment of the mystery of celibacy, for it is only as part of the paschal mystery of Christ that celibacy can become an integral element of christian economy.

It is the view of the Second Vatican Council, reiterated several times, that, like martyrdom, celibacy is witness to the new creation, a sign of the resurrection, of the new humanity whose origin is not in the desire of the flesh or in the will of man, but in the will of God (Jn 1 : 13, cf. PO n.3,13; OT n.10). By embracing celibacy a man becomes the living symbol of christian hope.

Thus the primary function of celibacy is not ethical or pragmatic, but eschatological. For this reason praises of virginity in the Church are never meant as denigrations of marriage (cf. OT n.10). The celibate renounces the world, he does not denounce it. Not relinquishing the joys and sorrows of marriage is central to celibacy,

---

<sup>4</sup> A lot of contemporary discussion of celibacy is vitiated by a kind of spiritual myopia. This faulty vision is encountered on both sides of the issue. Some defenders of celibacy argue as if marriage were almost a sin; some see the whole justification of celibacy in terms ecclesiastical politics and pastoral efficiency. Its opponents talk solely in terms of psychology, selffulfillment, sexual dynamisms, biological needs and cultural patterning.

but the freedom of the children of the resurrection which it symbolises in this world. A celibate is a child of the resurrection (Lk 20 : 36), he lives the eschaton in mystery here and now. His life is a manifestation of our glorified life presently hidden with Christ in God (Col 3 : 3; 1 Pt 1 : 4), the glorified existence in which we share through our baptism, and which will be revealed in all of us on the last day. Shall we, then, dare to say that a celibate is a sacrament of the risen humanity among men still *in via*? (cf. PO n.3,16).

My celibacy is an invitation to show in my own life the features of the Lord, but the Lord was crucified and then he rose; he is the one who was dead and now lives (Rm 1 : 18). Therefore to witness the power of Christ's resurrection means also to witness his Cross. To proclaim Christ's resurrection one has to die with him. All I want to know, says St. Paul, is Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. That is the way I hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead (Ph 3 : 11—12).

If we have died with Christ, we do not belong to the world, our life is hidden with Christ in God; but we are still in the world, Jesus did not promise to take us out of it, but to protect us from the evil one. Though we have died to the law of the flesh we are still waiting for the death of the body; though we have died to sin, sin and death still have a dominion over us. There is a painful ambiguity in christian life; of this ambiguity also the celibate life has to be symbol. For this reason a celibate's spirituality needs to be the spirituality of the beatitudes.

For in the demands and the promises of the beatitude this ambivalence of christian existence is expressed. Attempting to live the beatitudes, being poor, meek, peaceful, is the best way of crucifying the world to oneself and oneself to the world (Gal 6 : 14), but also of making sure that one will share in the cross of Christ, persecuted, despised, calumined, made mournful, hungry and poor. And in this way inheriting the promise now and for ever.

In the beatitudes Christ does not ask us to give up sin, but some natural and legitimate sources of human freedom and happiness. Therefore there is suffering and sadness in obeying. But what is natural might become an unnecessary burden if we want to follow Christ where he is going, therefore giving it up is a liberation. A man of the beatitudes is the true grave-merry man of Plato! This explains the ambivalence in our view and experience of celibacy (an ambivalence reflected even in the Council documents and in Pope Paul's encyclical): it is both the sacrifice of a good (marriage) for the sake of the Kingdom, and a liberation from a bond, also for the sake of the Kingdom.

Though as celibates we do not belong to the world, we have no

right to lose interest in it (cf. GS n. 1, *Document on Renewal of Spirituality* p.2). The celibate freedom is not an invitation to selfishness, but an obligation to special witness. Freedom of the children of God is not a dispensation from caring for others; spirituality of detachment is not an ethic of unconcern. Even the Egyptian monks left the world, in order to serve it better.

Vatican II stresses repeatedly this duality in the priestly vocation; they „are indeed set apart in a certain sense within the midst of God's people. But this is so not that they may be separated from the people or from any man, but that they may be totally dedicated to the work which the Lord has raised them up. They cannot be ministers of Christ unless they are witnesses and dispensers of a life other than this earthly one. But they cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of men" (PO n.3).

A priest will not be a pastor if he is a stranger to the world which he has to serve, but he will have no service to offer if he is a stranger to God whom he proclaims to the world. A priest is a sinner among sinners (and he should not forget it), but he is also *Alter Christus* (and this is the source of his service). Christ saved the world, by convicting it of sin, by showing up its sinfulness. That must a priest: he must convict himself and the world of sin; and himself he must convict before he attempts to preach to others. But this conviction is not to destroy, but to discover the truth and so to save. Christ was hated by the world, because he gave evidence that its ways were evil (Jn 7 : 7). And in this hatred a priest will share.

Christian hope is not to be confused with evolutionary optimism. The New Testament is rather pessimistic about the world and history. Eschatology is not just more of the same, it is a radical newness. The Kingdom of heaven is not a natural flowering of the world, it is its transformation. Death will not be eliminated by evolution, it will be conquered and destroyed. It has already been conquered Christ's death and resurrection. Of this victory the celibate life is a sign and witness.

Celibacy is both a manifestation and an extreme acceptance of death. A celibate refuses to use his body for its most central purpose: union of persons and their continuation in a new life, in this sense he is already reading his body; refusing to continue himself in his children a celibate accepts biologically the ultimate death: when he dies childless he dies completely as a human body; a human life comes to an end, there is no trace left of him on earth. There is no hope for him, no future, except in the resurrection. He places himself fully in the hands of the Father, and thus reproduces in his body the death of Christ.

His whole life is a contradiction of the life of this world. In a sense it is profoundly true to call celibate and monastic life a living

death. As Bouyer observes a celibate „anticipates already the renunciations which (all christians) will be forced to make at the hour of death".<sup>5</sup>

Through his life the celibate proclaims and symbolizes the death of all flesh. Thus he proclaims the ultimate truth about the world, for the world is moribund.

It was saved by the death of Christ. By his death in life a celibate proclaims the death of Jesus; and the salvation of the world. He becomes as one „who loves the coming of Christ". His life becomes kerygma, his life becomes his mission. Always, wherever we may be, says St. Paul, we carry with us in our bodies the death (*nekrosis*) of Jesus; so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body. „Indeed, while still alive we are consigned to our death every day, for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus, too, may be openly shown" (2 Cor 4 : 10—11). Why should it be manifested? So that out of this death life for others might grow: so death is at work in us, but life in you (*ib.*).

This, then, is the ultimate justification of priestly celibacy: living the state of death (*nekrosis*) of Christ, so that Christ may be at working others. This way both the priest and his flock will share in the final resurrection in Christ (*cf.* 2 Cor 4 : 14). A priest has to share in the death of Christ more deeply and in a more manifest fashion, in order that he may become a sacrament of Christ's death for others. It is very fitting that he who presides over the sacrament of the death of the Lord, should share in that death in a special fashion.

There is the death of Adam, and there is the death of Christ. The death that is the wages of sin, and the death that is the source of life. We have to die one or the other; there is no other choice. There is the suffering in the world which brings death, and there is the suffering "according to God" which brings salvation (2 Cor 7 : 10), because it brings conversion and shaping of our life after the image of God, our *theomorphosis*.

Adam wanted to be like God on his own terms and by his own power and gained death; when we die with Christ we are made the sons of God. Hence the business of every christian is to learn the death of Christ; and it is the special duty of a priest to be a living sign of this death. Hence the obligation to learn it lies on him most heavily.

Christ's death was but the first word of the Resurrection. If a celibate dies in this life, it is with Christ that he dies, only to live with Christ for ever. The celibate life might be described, then, as a vigil before the resurrection. With Christ we have descended into the dark regions of night and death, and watch for the morning of

---

<sup>5</sup> L. Bouyer, *Introduction to spirituality*, p. 188. He is poor and alone, because death is a lonely thing.

the new creation. Merton has once compared the monastic life to the earth before the first day of creation: it is dark and empty and formless, but the spirit of God is above it.<sup>6</sup> This spirit will raise Christ from the dead. The celibate's waiting is a matter of history (Christ has died), of faith (he has risen), and of hope (he will come again). It is only against this perspective that our life makes any sense at all.

Such a vigil is a matter of love. „I sleep, but my heart is awake. I hear my Beloved knocking”, sings the Bride (Sg 5 : 2.). Only because I love am I willing to die with Christ; without loving God above all celibacy is folly and asoul devouring demon.

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Th. Merton, *Contemplation in a world of action*, p. 279.