

Reflection on Chastity and Celibacy

How is one to think about entering into a life of celibacy and chastity? Should this way of life be accepted or chosen? This reflection will offer thoughts from the position that a life of celibacy and chastity should be willingly chosen and not accepted as mere conditions of ordination or entrance into holy orders.

That something is willingly chosen means that it is done knowingly, voluntarily, and intelligently. If this phrase sounds familiar, it describes the necessary elements for waiving one's rights, such as Miranda rights, when arrested. Waiving one's Miranda rights involves giving up a liberty; thus, our society places an emphasis on preservation of justice and autonomy in doing so. We respect the actor's ability and competency to make decisions regarding their rights and their welfare.

Taking vows or promises of chastity does not completely parallel legal requirements of competency, but there are some instructive themes. We recognize that those individuals with intellectual, emotional, or cognitive limitations do not have the requisite competency to waive a right. We place emphasis on an individual's capacities in order to make decisions.

I would propose a similar conceptualization for understanding the requisites to assent to a life of celibacy and chastity. One must intelligently know what one is sacrificing by "waiving." This would entail that individuals have knowledge about sexual life and relationships along with adequate and substantial information regarding sexuality. Does one making a promise of celibacy always have this? Informal discussions with clergy reveal limitations in knowledge of sexuality and sexual behavior.

I would further propose that theological knowledge is inadequate as a sole basis for competence to make a decision regarding celibacy. One may easily quote Scripture or church doctrine regarding the holiness of celibacy but this knowledge cannot form the complete grounds for entering into such a life.

This is because there are other elements in competency to make decisions and enter into contracts. There is the concept of voluntariness -- that one makes a decision free from compulsion or coercion. Is it always the case that one accepts the dictates of chastity free from compulsion or coercion? I would argue that some who seek out religious life and celibacy may be doing so due to a compulsion to avoid looking at one's sexual identity. If exploration of one's sexual identity is discouraged or demeaned, one may be compelled to enter a life that continues to avoid such questions.

This brings us to the capacity to make decisions intelligently. I would argue that the ability to intelligently make decisions extends beyond mere knowledge-- a factual understanding-- but also having

a rational understanding of the consequences of the decision. Rationality here does not just mean mere cognitive ability. In order to make rational decisions — those in one's best interest — one must also have an understanding of the emotional impact of decisions. We are not mere creatures making decisions about our lives from a game theoretical perspective. We are always and continually involved in emotional world whether we recognize it or not.

Which brings us to perhaps the most important element in making a decision regarding chastity. Where is one in their emotional self — knowledge and development? Science has taught us that we continue to develop cognitively and emotionally well into our mid-20s. That development is realized by the continual integration of sensory and emotional information in the brain. Sensory experiences and memories are labeled with emotional meaning, which provides a basis for navigating life in the future. One must be able to understand the “what” of experienced as well as the “meaning” of that experience. Meaning requires an understanding of who we are in the context of a world, both internal and external. We must understand ourselves within the system of relationships with those around us. This understanding is driven by a sense of who we are, what we are, and what we want to be and is derived from access to our emotional life. We must know what we “feel” to truly understand what we “know” about the world and ourselves.

Therefore, the argument is this — individuals who enter into promises or vows of chastity must attain a level of emotional development commensurate with the capacity to forgo a life of sexual behavior. This emotional development must be the primary marker of one's capacity to enter such a life in contrast to possessing theological knowledge. One must have an understanding of who they are—(i.e. be emotionally integrated.) One must have an understanding of what they are feeling—(i.e. be emotionally aware/intelligent). Lastly, one must have an understanding of how they will feel and how they will cope with life of chastity—(i.e. emotional maturity).

Emotional maturity, defined as the ability of facilitating and guiding emotional tendencies to reach intended goals, must be the bedrock of entering into a life of chastity/celebrity. We therefore recognize that emotional immature individuals would be unable to successfully manage stressful situations effectively and would be at risk of “acting out.” We have seen such acting out come to light in various permutations within the church over the last number of years. Now is the opportunity to make the paradigmatic shift towards the primacy of emotional development and maturity in pursuing religious life. Future reflections will further elucidate emotional development and offer guidance on its cultivation.