

TRAINING FOR PRIESTLY CELIBACY
JOSÉ SARAIVA MARTINS
TITULAR ARCHBISHOP OF TURBUMICA
SECRETARY OF THE CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION

The gift of living in fellowship with Christ, following his example, for the glory of God and the service of the brethren in priestly celibacy is a grace and a commitment. For this, there needs to be suitable training. John Paul II's postsynodal Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* clearly and precisely affirms the choice of celibacy for candidates to the priesthood in the Latin Church and in some of the Oriental Churches, explains the reasons for it, and gives an account of its values.¹ But it also offers some practical advice for a positive pedagogy of the gift and commitment of celibacy within the framework of training the human personality towards affective maturity.² To this effect, the most recent Magisterium of the Church, confirming what has been proposed by previous interventions of the Supreme Pontiffs and of Vatican II points out the human and spiritual itinerary allowing the celibate life to be lived for «the kingdom of heaven» in the priestly ministry, with a genuine balance between the gift of grace and the radical demands of human love.³

The gift of the vocation to celibacy is postulated in the call to the priesthood, without there being any conflict between its radical requirements and its potential realization in its human, bio-psychological and emotional reality. It can and must be lived in humble, serene and positive *moral rectitude* and genuine *spiritual freedom*, freedom allowing the joyous realization of the gift of self in fellowship with the Lord and in his service, for the good of the Church. We are talking here of the celibate life led, with boundless charity, in a human, priestly experience not turned selfishly in on itself, nor gloomily frustrated by lack of emotional equilibrium and absence of supernatural motivation, but permeated through and through with genuine human values, serene in its wealth of feelings, fruitful in works.

Primarily, training for celibacy is a *task that the Church undertakes with regard to candidates for the priesthood*, at the same time that it demands the choice of celibacy and verifies the signs of a genuine divine vocation. For the Church seeks to guide candidates for the priesthood to a full understanding and acceptance of that which is, first of all, the Father's gift to a few (cf Mt 19:11). And it is a task that the Church in its turn entrusts to those appointed to be in charge of priestly training throughout its complex pedagogic itinerary from initial training to refresher courses. This being so, a clear educative line, with definite and positive options, must be at the basis of the undertaking at the various levels of training, from professors of theology to confessors and spiritual directors, from superiors responsible for discernment and vocational training to the very environment in which the training takes place and to the training programmes unyieldingly, with a practical and realistic view of the demands that a real and joyous choice and experience of celibacy makes today in our society, and especially reinforced by the witness of life.

Training for celibacy is also, however, a task that the candidate for the priesthood himself cannot refuse, for he, aware of the gift he has received and of the demands it makes in the light of his own experience and of his relationships with others, but above all in his personal and living relationship with Christ, cannot help but be aware of how important the choice of celibacy is. It is a choice which is rooted, like love itself, in the deepest, most intimate and concrete aspect of his personality and which, therefore, must be lived *pan passu* with his physical, human and psychological evolution, in a harmonious synthesis of spiritual and human values and in consciously verifying his inner motivations and the results he is producing.

So it is clear that the training needed for celibacy as total loving response to Christ and his service, involves on the one hand, the mediation of the Church in her clearly postulated doctrine and in its practical pedagogic application. We are talking here of supplying teaching, pedagogy, discernment, individually tailored and constant help, as the celibate life must be one of constancy and growing fidelity. And on the other hand, it demands in the candidate for the priesthood an especially clear and lucid knowledge of the obligations and renunciations entailed in celibacy, and of the practical potentialities of living it, of the bright path it opens to a full realization of the priestly vocation. It simultaneously requires a sincere awareness of its hardships and a constant verifying of it as an effective and positive experience: verification which, to be genuine, may never be divorced from the theological meeting with the Lord in prayer and from sincere manifestation of conscience and life with confessors, spiritual directors and educators.

The Church's first task in training for celibacy is that of the clear doctrinal exposition of its supernatural values. With this magisterial task, the Church's formative role begins. At this source, anyone who feels called to choose virginity for the sake of the kingdom should draw on the truth and life of God's gift «in the obedience of faith», so as to discover the concrete will of God entrusted to the magisterial mediation of the Church, our Mother and Teacher.

It must be clearly stated that the Church of our day has not fallen short in this task. Diverse, insistent, clear interventions of the Magisterium of the Church in our century have drawn attention to the values and demands of celibacy. Be it sufficient to recall the teachings of Vatican II about it and more especially the authoritative synthesis contained in Paul VI's Encyclical Letter *Sacerdotalis coelibatus* of 24 June 1967, as also the continuous and heartfelt interventions of John Paul II. The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, expressing the desire and conclusions of the 1990 Synod of Bishops, clearly sets out and confirms this task. But the Church has, as it were, willed to make its pedagogic principles even clearer by laying down certain practical guidelines for training which, subsequent to Paul VI's encyclical, were issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education under the title *Educational guidelines for training for priestly celibacy*, dated 11 April 1974. These texts all still retain their value and cannot be

commented on at length, much less summarized, in this study. Nonetheless, these texts are basic to training for celibacy, be it for the candidates to the priesthood or for those who train them, in that these texts contain the best and most authoritative summary of the teachings of the Magisterium.

Beside such a wealth of magisterial teaching and pedagogic guidelines, our own task, however, is to offer an interpretative key, a clear and precise choice, to explain one postulate of training, with specific stress on the *spiritual* character of these pedagogic guidelines. I say *spiritual*, not in the sense of excluding other aspects, but as it were in quest of a sapiential synthesis of the training for celibacy, which ought to be integrated with the other contributions.

The postulate comprises some essential and fixed points, five to be precise, which, it seems to me, interlock to form a coherent theory of training: affirmation of the values; exposition of the pedagogic guidelines which embody the values in actual life, the practical personal and responsible acceptance of the grace and of the teaching; the needful objective verification and discernment as to the consistency with which the celibate life is lived and the opening to a road of personalization, growth, equilibrium and interiorization in the priestly life.

Education to supernatural values

The postulate of priestly celibacy on the part of the Church is clear in its requirements: to embrace perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven as recommended by Christ the Lord (cf Mt 19:12). The Church requires the living of the call to the ministerial priesthood in a life of chastity which precludes marriage, with all its prerogatives and demands, and all illicit use of one's sexuality. This radical postulate of evangelical celibacy, which seems to stand in absolute contrast to the innate instinct of human love, is neither impossible nor unnatural, nor is it to the detriment of the true values of the person. God's grace makes its realization possible and human experience itself reveals the possibility of a full realization of the person in this freely and knowingly accepted way of life. Such potentiality for realizing the person in lofty, transcendent values brightens the candidates potential and actual vision.

Un-rhetorically and exactly in the manner required, the Church seems to summarize the *supernatural* values of the choice of celibacy round three basic nuclei, which are in

themselves able to give a full orientation to the more radical tendencies of human love and sexuality, integrating as they do ideals, motivations and modes of conduct. I mean those three nuclei put forward by Pius XI and Pius XII in their respective encyclicals on the celibate life, *Ad catholici sacerdotii* and *Sacra virginitas*, summarised in the Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis* of Vatican II, n. 16, and expounded by Paul VI in the encyclical *Sacerdotalis coelibatus*: Christological significance, ecclesiological significance, eschatological significance.⁴ It is sufficient however, with a few notes, to recall the overall and practical significance of these values, which have to be postulated, expounded, interiorized and lived in constant faithfulness, so that they become personalized and personalizing as value and motivation, taken in and lived as second nature, in such wise as to bridge the gap between the doctrine stated and life as it is lived.

a. As regards the Christological value of celibacy, we have to stress the actual person of Christ and his example, his life filled with love and self-giving to the Father in chaste love and fully realized humanity. If the reality of Christ's divine nature seems to make his experience as regards virginity unique and unrepeatable, the full truth of his humanity is a stimulus for us to measure our humanity against his, his experience against what we experience, for us to make his feelings ours, for us to desire the fullness of his purity and chaste love for his fellow-beings, his total dedication to doing the Father's work. Christ thus is the supreme and definitive reason for priestly celibacy; he illustrates that it is possible, the basic motivation for living it in the Church and world of today. But this involves the threefold dimension of life in Christ, as does every other aspect of being his follower: living *like him*, in imitation and faithfulness to his word; *with him*, in the fellowship of grace and life with his person; *for him*, in vital motivation of action and faithfulness to a covenantal commitment to his person and his gospel.

In pedagogic terms, the Christological significance of celibacy, as proclamation of newness, grace of fellowship and effective personalization of one's own self-realization in love, is absolutely essential, since it is the first, the last the supernatural reason from which all others flow and to which all others tend. This being so, training for celibacy goes *pan passu* with Christological pedagogy, the discovery of the Lord and Master, the demands inherent in being his disciple and the potentialities of an authentic life in Christ in the intimacy and friendship of discipleship.⁵

b. The *ecclesiological* significance, also derived from the Christological one, operates on a twofold practical level, that is to say, education in human love and supernatural love in the practical form of self-giving. On the one hand, the priest, in relation to Christ, is as it were an expression of the ecclesial community; he represents his bride the Church in faithfulness to the unique bridegroom, a faithfulness that the priest lives in virginity and in the absolute gift of himself. But, as regards the ecclesial community, the priest is also the ikon of Christ the bridegroom, being totally given to serving and loving the brethren. Such 'freedom' in loving

makes him particularly suitable for exercising his priestly ministry with all the demands it makes, for he can devote all his human and emotional energies to it: hearing and preaching the word of God, dedication to prayer and the celebration of the sacraments. At the same time, celibacy lived in the integration of his affectivity makes him more free, open-hearted, available, universal, to serve the brethren with fresh and lively energy, frequently repaid by the love of the community and, should he be called, to express the greater love of the gift of his own life, as may be required by the supreme demands of the imitation of Christ, for the sake of the Church.

At the *pedagogic* level, a clear and progressive opening of the future priest's heart to the experience of ecclesial service, to the apostolate understood as the free and openhearted gift of self, is absolutely necessary, as is also an education in understanding other people, in friendship, in compassion, in the serene experience of his own frailty; for this will make the priest merciful and strong, detached from self and open to all. He who loves Christ «loves all that comes from him», as Vladimir Solovyev so beautifully puts it in *The Legend of Antichrist*.⁶ Education to detachment in itself, to universalization and ecclesialization of life, that is to say, to living for the Church, are gradually translated into those attitudes of openness, altruism, open-heartedness, which are signs of a consistent maturation in true love and emotional equilibrium, without which there is no authentic or sound experience of priestly life.⁷

c. The *eschatological* significance of celibacy was indicated by the Lord when he told of the mystery of eternal life (cf Mt 19:10-12; 22:29-30). Of this type, of life we can say that it has its roots in the life of God as origin, and has its crown in glory. By living celibately in this life, the priest shows his shining faith in the divine life from which we come and to which we aspire. At the same time, the witness of celibacy consciously relativizes that which for some people is the unique source of pleasure and self-fulfilment in this life, and invites people to look beyond the ephemeral and illuminates the destiny to which we look forward in hope. Thus celibacy puts God in first place, bears witness to values that never pass away, displays to all the hope of greater things, even relativizes that great sign of human love, I mean marriage, destined to be transfigured in glory.

This postulate of the eschatological value of celibacy, *at the level of training*, also has a necessary motivation and a coherent explanation: I mean a motivation which we may call the intra-eschatological dimension of celibacy in history. For the priest is called with his celibate life to the vital service in the community. He makes God's children sharers in heavenly things on this earth, transmits *everlasting life* by the Word and the sacraments, educates his people in values which do not pass away, in such wise that Christians, thanks to his open-hearted devotedness, already live in the coming kingdom.

Yet maybe today we also sense yet another value of celibacy and virginity, namely its effective *spiritual fruitfulness*. To put our thought in anthropological terms, we may say that it is not enough, absolutely speaking, *to pass on life*, which is the noble and holy task of Christian marriage, but we need *to pass on the meaning of life*, too. In a world where life is held in contempt, or regarded as meaningless or as commonplace without a transcendental dimension, next to parents (they too being called not only to pass on life but to educate as well) stands the priest with his ministry of the word, of sanctification, of charity and service, to illuminate the transcendental meaning of life. Although on account of his celibate choice the priest *does not pass on physical life*, nonetheless, with his open-hearted experience and loving service for all, he *gives meaning to* as Christ has done, and in a mysterious continuation of Christ's ministry. In this sense, the eschatological dimension of celibacy becomes a concrete contribution to the humanization of life and to its education, in the truest transcendent sense of the human condition. In fellowship with families and married people, the priest feels himself to be an authentic witness and educator of life and of its absolute meaning, lighting up human history, people's joys and hopes, their sorrows and anxieties.

Practical pedagogic guidelines

A coherent and specific education for celibacy is not exhausted by the authoritative and convincing presentation of its supernatural values in the light of faith as proposed by the Magisterium of the Church. It needs concrete presentation in a series of practical pedagogic guidelines which deal with all the positive and negative aspects that the choosing of chastity for the sake of the kingdom entails. It is therefore significant that Paul VI chose to have his programmatic encyclical on celibacy followed by the document issued by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, which has as its title and content: *Educational guidelines for training for priestly celibacy*. Thus we pass from the values of the guidelines, from the ideal choice of celibacy to a practical pedagogy for living it to the full, for it is a matter of supernatural values having to be concretely lived in the reality of human nature with its demands and problems all in all.

And since it is a question of a choice for which the Church asks but which has to be embraced in full freedom of awareness of its obligations, the guidelines have to respond to certain fundamental requirements. For it must not be a blind choice, but enlightened and aware; not left to a spontaneity ignoring the difficulties, but subjected to an *ascesis* at once severe and positive which avoids the difficulties; not divorced from the fundamental root of the person, which is love, but rather rooted in a capacity for loving, for welcoming and offering friendship; not isolated from the totality of life to the point where celibacy becomes one single obsessive

obligation, but made easy by attention to other aspects of life integrating the bio-physical and spiritual equilibrium.

Behold then the need for developing pedagogic guidelines in four directions, which we shall simply list by reference to the *Guidelines* aforementioned.⁸

a. *A wise sex education* is needed, and this should aim at informing candidates for the celibate life about everything that concerns the integral dimensions of the human person. A good mental hygiene which tackles problems realistically and teaches candidates how to live at peace with their own bodies and their own feelings and to respect those of others in accordance with gospel morality, is the best basis for a serene and unobsessive, clear and unmuddled view, made available at the right moment, thus cutting out dubious investigations and information from tainted sources. It is a question of offering a balanced, serene knowledge, all the more necessary since the future priest will have to be furnished with a clear awareness of everything concerning sexuality and marriage, for his ministry. Today this education is all the more urgent in its integrity and with the proper respect and modesty, since society through the mass media offers fragmentary and misleading information and convictions. Often, as we shall see further on, information of this type needs to be checked out in the areas of conscience and spiritual direction.

b. Genuine training for chastity cannot do without a timely *ascetic and spiritual pedagogy* concerning the positive education of the heart and its feelings, of the body and its senses, in relation to oneself and to others. And since sexuality is rooted in the inmost depths of the person and has profound repercussions both externally and internally involving the whole person, a positive *ascesis* has to be applied involving the whole person, and a realistic spiritual pedagogy to educate men, in full freedom and conviction, to reject whatever may harm the equilibrium of chastity in thoughts, images, words and conversations, actions, affections. Yet everything with the needful positive orientation of one who knows how to choose the good and shun evil, of one who is convinced he is to make the choice for an authentic moral good. In this field too, the general pedagogic guidelines have to take practical shape in personalized verification, in overcoming subjectivism, in docility to the prompting of grace and in sincere search for moral truth.

c. In reality, training in celibacy is a *training in true love*, at the same time natural and supernatural, in genuine friendship directed towards Christ and the brethren. The test of celibacy lies in the heart, in real love, just as the imbalance of hedonism is rooted in selfishness. The signs of a clear disposition to live the celibate life are those of a person who is open, cheerful, great-hearted, forgetful of self, obliging. Friendship is a divine and human word. Starting from the

initial experiences of human friendship, teacher and pupil should discover and educate that initial capacity for loving, which requires exquisite tact if it is to make progress, through purifications and disappointments, phases of light and shade, towards the person's affective maturation: a true love educated to overcome possessive and selfish tendencies (often also marked by the quest for pleasure) and directed towards a balanced relationship with other people. There is no true friendship without suffering and purification; no authentic friendship in priestly life can be built without supernatural motivation. There can be no education to love without a genuine education and mastery of the feelings. The ability to weave an ample net of relationships and communications is needed excluding no one, a maturation of freedom and of growth in altruism with respect to the freedom and personality of others, an ever clearer education in translating friendship into the giving of service.

The insistence with which the Church's documents dwell on the need for human maturation and affective balance is most marked for these two qualities are the results of this

necessary education in loving which will make the priest happy and fulfilled in the celibate life, that is to say, in experiencing a strong, loving friendship with Christ and with the brethren, marked by both natural and supernatural equilibrium.

d. A last and necessary pedagogic guideline requires the *all-inclusiveness and balance of the various aspects of the training* so as to meet all the needs and sectors of personal, community and social life. Such an equilibrium is needed in the approach to initial training for the sake of a harmonious education; but it needs regular checking, and adjustments whenever there is any indication that the celibate life is heading for the rocks. We refer here to the need not to isolate the commitment to chastity from all the other components of personality and life, from individual and community experience, which require a rich and harmonious combination of human and spiritual values. Celibacy, training for it, experience of it, needs the *humus* of all the other aspects that make up the Christian life and the priestly vocation. Chastity is not a gospel flower enclosed within some greenhouse, but growing alongside all the other blooms in the garden of evangelical life. It needs a positive, orderly, clean, outdoor environment; chastity harmonizes with the demands of work and study, grows stronger in the commitment of a genuine personal and community piety, expands in the fellowship of human relations. It needs to be balanced to be healthy, it needs regular times set aside for rest and recreation, the activity of some kind of sport, and some kind of artistic or intellectual hobby; it matures with the initial experiences of apostolate and service to others. The celibate life takes shape and draws strength in the joy of open fellowship, where deeds, words and duties are steeped in truth and cordiality.

Because of all this, the pedagogic guidelines have to be sustained and strengthened by basic, practical, pedagogic decisions in our teaching establishments, in such wise that these do indeed

offer the mark and as it were the 'imprint' of a wide range of values and a clear and positive presentation of aspects of life.

A personal response in freedom

Although the authoritative setting forth of the values of celibacy and the relevant pedagogic guidelines is the shining, perennial task of Church and teachers, acceptance above all requires personal commitment on the part of those who are called, so that the celibacy asked for by the Church be a choice made in freedom, assisted by grace. It has, therefore, to be an experience based on truth, and it presupposes a real and practical knowledge of the demands of the celibate life, so as to ingraft a living and real love of celibacy into the substance of the person, each with its own physiology, its own psychology, own impulses, own tendencies, in such a way that there be no dualism, much less any dangerous and false sublimation unable to withstand the shock of difficulties and temptations.

The demands of priestly celibacy are not to be confused with simply not being married, nor indeed with right and proper sexual continence, which gospel morality requires of everyone. The obligations of celibacy are set fair and square in the threefold basic renunciation of sexual activity, of the rich complexity of conjugal love, of the desire for the experience of fatherhood.⁹ This threefold tendency, firmly rooted in the person, and which is renounced in the celibate life, should undergo genuine, positive training, without which the person may be damaged, an imbalance be set up in the priest, or a dualism be established between the values which require and make renunciation possible and the actual behaviour of someone who professes the celibate life but in fact does not live it.

But the renunciations also have a positive implication. Clearly the renunciation of licit sexual activity also has its counterpart, at least at the level of gospel choice, in the experiences of the serenity and beauty of chastity itself, of the bliss of purity of heart and body. Not even conjugal love, although an innate tendency, is an absolute, nor is it an indispensable necessity. The celibate life, whether consecrated or not, can express itself in love of service and giving, in friendship, in the richness of human relationships, in intellectual and artistic work, and so forth. Not even fatherhood is an absolute good. The natural tendency to reproduce oneself, with all the beauty of the vocation assigned to our parents by the Creator and Father, can also be discharged in other forms of fatherhood: adoptive, educative, spiritual. The future priest should be able to consider and evaluate these ways in which the human vocation can be fulfilled even outside marriage.

But consecrated celibacy, practically speaking, requires positive training for the threefold renunciation in terms of the supernatural values mentioned above. Educators and those who are preparing for the priesthood should be especially careful to ensure that these supernatural values are accepted and that they cause a real and gradual change of convictions and motivations as well as a redirection towards alternative values, in the practical possibilities offered by the priestly vocation. Three notes seem to be needed about this.

a. Obviously, the threefold renunciation described above does not present itself with the same force and intensity all at once. The sexual problem will always be there, but requires a first and basic training to chastity in adolescence, in youth, so as to lay the foundations for clear consistency between sex education, tendencies and feelings, and behaviour genuinely in accordance with the demands of new life in Christ and of the specific duties and discipleship. The dimension of conjugal love will have its first awakenings in the tendency to relate to the opposite sex, in the initial opening to friendship, to experiencing the attraction that contact with young people can provoke even in the sphere of early experiences in the apostolate. But clearly the problem will recur with other implications in other phases of future priestly life, in private experiences of loneliness, failure and ordeal. This is why a lucid and open, far-sighted and serene education which can give guidance and warning in this field should help the candidates for the priesthood to take stock of these demands arising out of their own nature, so that they can deal with them calmly when the moment comes. The tendency to natural fatherhood and awareness of effectively having renounced it is the last of the tendencies to make itself felt in the celibate priest's heart. But even this will be guided and illuminated as soon as it occurs and be directed towards the realizing of an effective spiritual fatherhood.

b. Plainly the awakening of the three tendencies just described and the effective training for celibate renunciation will have to be undergone in a natural, normal way, with both their positive and their negative aspects, in the inner depths, the sensibility and psychic make-up of the candidates for the priesthood and of the priests themselves. Celibate renunciation is conditioned by positive and negative messages received about it from outside, by the realism with which a sound and truthful training for the life tackles them, or by exaggerated ideas which may arise either because of the culpable silence about these problems on the part of the educators or because of inadequate treatment of the problems and how to solve them, or lastly by the mistaken quest for information, stimuli and opportunities which can disturb the life of priestly celibacy. Although the candidate for the priesthood ought to be aware of his own tendencies and of the most appropriate ways of acquiring adequate knowledge and positive guidance, it is his instructors' job to anticipate, and that is to say meet halfway, in an orderly fashion, the demands for information and positive guidance in such ways as to open up a clear road for a developing awareness of demands, dangers and setbacks in this field.

c. This third comment stems from the conviction that celibacy is a gift of grace. It involves a call and correspondingly an initial enabling by grace to grasp and live its demands in the dynamic of faithfulness appropriate to the vocation and with recourse to the proper means for knowing and living the gift and conditions of celibate life. In the training process therefore, not only is the necessary information to be made available, but the effective capacity to respond, in faith, to the gift is to be stimulated, starting from the initial grace received, by activating all the positive attitudes of faithfulness and openness to the action of the Spirit and by making use of all means leading to practical experience of grace: self-discipline and custody of the senses, training for friendship and work, interior life and prayer, devotion to the Virgin Mary, etc. All, however, in a balance between genuine information and sex education, guidance in the meaning of friendship, human realism in progressively facing problems connected with celibacy and the necessary supernatural dimension of the commitment and of the pedagogy, for a personal acceptance of the gift of grace which celibacy presupposes. There should never be one thing without the other. Otherwise, superficial training can degenerate into a merely human view of sexuality and love, and a spirituality without human basis, coherent pedagogy and perceptive psychology can create false and fragile illusions unable to hold up against the sharp onset of problems and the demands of faithfulness in the midst of temptations.

It is plain, on the other hand, that absence of a specific capacity to grasp and live the demands of the celibate life is the sign of the absence of a specific grace for this: and this leads us to conclude that here we have a candidate who has not received this essential grace, or to discern that there has not been adequate faithfulness to God's 'precious gift' and the charism of the Holy Spirit, which priestly celibacy entails.

Necessary personal and ecclesial verification

Training for the celibate life needs proper and constant verification, in the sense of discernment and of facing up to the truth, as regards this essential sector of priestly life and preparation for it, with its advances and its difficulties, the loss of true motivation or the weakening of fervour, the needful consolidation of gains, the arising of new problems, the necessary vigilance against any kind of presumption even in moments of greatest security. Such checking keeps the doctrinal principles alive and working, inspiring and constantly helping to maintain the ideal, amid the realities of daily life, in constant growth.

There seems to be three ways for verifying and discerning. The more intimate, interior one is concerned with personal answerability to the Lord, who is ever the friend and bridegroom with

whom the commitment to celibacy is a real 'covenant' of conjugal love, to which absolute faithfulness is due and for which the Lord promises forgiveness, should it ever be broken by sin. Another is the more exterior, though just as necessary, one of ecclesial verification, of the dialogue with the confessor, accompanied by recourse to the sacrament of Reconciliation with its purifying and fortifying grace, and this accompanied by spiritual direction. This kind of verification overcomes the danger of subjectivism and opens the heart to the search for truth in humility and docility: in the sincere search for truth beyond one's own judgement and one's own opinion, which might sometimes conceal a perilous subjectivism. There is, however, a third way which is not to be ignored and which becomes necessary in many cases: a psychological verification, entrusted to competent persons, whenever candidates evince pathological symptoms that merit expert opinion in the psychiatric field.

a. The first way of verification, the interior one of the relationship with Christ, is undoubtedly the one most needed. It occupies a special place in private prayer, understood as

the time of intimacy and truth before God: prayer in which our life and conscience are taken up and laid bare before God, illuminated by the Word: what we really are. Anyone who sincerely wishes to live the celibate life cannot but open his or her conscience before God, with a firm and sincere wish to be illuminated and assisted by grace, with a sincere effort of discernment. In this prayer for self-knowledge and discernment, the candidate for the priesthood should be capable of questioning himself about the true quality of his actions and motivations, about his problems, yieldings and falls if any. In prayer, he should assess the dangers surrounding him and seek remedies which he can and should put into effect so as to keep his oblation to Christ serene and bright in chastity. In special moments of temptation and struggle, this is particularly necessary, while avoiding any sort of dangerous 'repression'.

Only sincere prayer, capable of laying the truth about one's own life before God in one's plea for help, is the kind of prayer that saves, that is to say, that allows the light of truth and grace to penetrate the conscience, that gives one sufficient resolution to amend one's ways and confirms one in a positive course of conversion and renewal. In prayer, interiorization of values takes place, attitudes are judged, guidance is accepted and personalized, important decisions are taken before God, illuminated by the light of his presence, from which nothing is hidden. Prayer is the seat of freedom and true commitment, celebration of the covenant with God, conjugal fellowship with Christ, the search for God's will and, if so be, the beginning of forgiveness and amendment of life.

At the pedagogic level, training for chastity in the celibate life involves training in prayer in this healthy realism of examining one's entire existence before God and of fearlessly allowing oneself to be scrutinized by God and by his love, so as to lay one's problems before him, always, in all truth, and asking for light and strength to overcome them.

b. The other way of verification, as we have said, is that of spiritual dialogue, of sincere and docile openness to one's superiors, to one's spiritual director, to one's confessor, or indeed even to a friend who may help one overcome difficulties and can offer positive guidance for one's life. The danger of subjectivism can even be inherent in prayer, when this does not conduce to the seeking of humble, ecclesial mediation in the form of spiritual direction or sacramental confession. Often the concrete moment of verification, the possibility of a suitable training tailored to one's needs, the chance of dealing with problems in practical terms and of giving precise guidance on celibacy, as opposed to overriding and general principles, lies in this way of spiritual dialogue. If for the one part it is the candidate for the priesthood's own responsibility to seek this encounter to 'get to the truth', it is also the favourable opportunity for educators to exert their practical skills as spiritual guides. Nor should these educators fail in humble boldness to make contact with people, particularly with the young, on the level of actual problems that occur in a training for the celibate life, for two plain reasons:

— Often young candidates for celibacy are like a question not expressed in words but in attitudes, in search of an answer. They show an obvious timidity over tackling a dialogue on this topic; they need a respectful and sensitive initiative to be taken by someone who can reach the heart of the matter and start the dialogue they need and want to set their minds at rest.

— But there is another problem no less important. Today, candidates for the priesthood are drawn from a society which, owing to cultural habits, or ignorance of or contempt for transcendent values, out of growing permissiveness or precocious promiscuity between the sexes, has produced a mentality and often rules of conduct which are unfavourable and often gravely contrary to the requirements of celibate chastity. It is out of the question to suppose that the young men of today come from environments where chastity and virginity are important values at the human level, deliberately inculcated and taught. Indeed, a whole range of permissive habits directly contrary to the demands of chastity and how to preserve it, particularly at certain phases of life, has no importance attached to it at all. There is thus the risk of building on sand, of retaining an erroneous conscience produced by the mentality of the world and which will in the long run have harmful consequences for candidates to the priesthood. It is naive to imagine that candidates already have sufficient training in this respect, and certainly it is not enough just to offer values and guidelines; for verification, there must be personal dialogue as well.

At the formative level, we must encourage cordial openness of conscience, so as to be able to cope properly, with pedagogic realism, with the problems of celibacy. And on the part of those employed in training, this requires clear-sightedness, tact and a great capacity for acceptance and

understanding, so as to encourage sincere dialogue on which, as on the rock, to build an authentic system of training for the celibate life.

c. But we cannot overlook a third way of verification which is often needed to integrate the other two and sometimes to clarify the truth about other aspects that do not manage to emerge consciously either through prayer or through spiritual direction. I mean that psychological expertise which in immature persons, marked by traumatic experiences, hereditary tendencies or pathological symptoms, shows itself to be needed, to uncover unconscious negative tendencies, to guide in timely fashion the overcoming of those difficulties, or unequivocally to advise the choice of another state of life, were celibacy to turn out to be exceptionally difficult and in the long run dangerous, either for the young man himself or for the integrity of his priestly life or for the ecclesial community itself.

A journey of growing faithfulness

Training for celibacy, like experience of the spiritual life itself, is a dynamic process, open to the same dimension of priestly existence, to its crises of identity and faithfulness, often connected too with biological and psychological processes, and to its bursts of spirituality and apostolic activity, appropriate to the dynamism of grace and the commitment of a priestly existence orientated towards the holiness of conformation to Christ the Good Shepherd. Two notes on pedagogy are called for.

a. In the light of one approach to training for celibacy, it seems this ought to be concentrated in the period preceding priestly ordination. Obviously a correct education in values, a verification of attitudes, a joyous experience of chaste living, are signs of hope and serene trust which augur a secure future. On the consistency with which the priest can advance in this field depends too the certainty, with the help of grace, of human, spiritual, pastoral and apostolic fulfilment in celibacy — without shadow, even if not without struggle. On the diverse levels of the demands made by the celibate life however, problems arise in acute form in the years following priestly ordination. Today we are well aware of the need for continued training as suitable accompaniment for the discharge of the priestly vocation. Indeed, priestly training, at all its levels, is constantly required for a continual ‘rekindling’ of the grace of priesthood and the demands of the same.¹⁰

As regards celibacy, the problem of love and sexuality, the need for balanced and mature relationships with men and women of different ages, the call (which can sometimes be urgent) to effective integration and fatherhood, all come in the years after priestly ordination. Although a positive continuity with previous training is a certain guarantee for the future, this will obviously depend on the priest's actual ability to live in growing faithfulness (as has been mentioned above), as regards values, guidelines and sincere verification in the dialogue of prayer and spiritual direction. The *Guidelines for training* mentioned above, devote a number of important pages to illustrating the difficulties which turn up unexpectedly in adulthood, the reasons for crises in priestly life and the criteria for anticipating and resolving them.¹¹

b. The positive and dynamic meaning of celibacy, growth in love for Christ and for serving him, the conjugal gift of oneself to the Church, open-heartedness towards the brethren: all these are innate in the Christian and priestly vocation, which is itself a pilgrimage, a journey, a gradual maturing. The 'trials' and 'hardships', the temptations and crises, are necessary in this, as in any other kind of life. There obviously has to be a purging of the celibate life as it is actually being lived, and this occurs at times when a realistic appraisal is being made of what some renunciations cost at the human level. A further investment of conjugal and pastoral love is required and a consequent renewal of the human and spiritual motivations of the celibate life, lest the impetus decrease and convictions waver, or one should realize that the original motivations are no longer enough to keep one faithful within a dynamic of growth.

The 'crises', as 'trials' of faithfulness imposed by God, are salutary. Purification is a condition normally needed for entering into the full realization of celibacy as total consecration to that love of Christ and the brethren which bears the seal of the paschal mystery: a dying to rise again. Sometimes radical temptations against celibacy work their way in: a wish to catch hold of life, a possible return to a 'normal' human life not deprived of those goods things that celibacy requires should be left behind. It may even seem that the only way out of the crisis, of normalizing one's existence after an experience which at certain moments seems to be self-delusion, would be to go back and start life over again by getting married. This is the supreme moment of trial and crisis, calling for a renewed drive, for a 'new opting for God' in the conviction and joy of self-giving to Christ and the Church.

The fact of the matter is that a final and convinced rootedness in the value of celibacy and in the serene practice of the same, the ability to be a guide and example to others on this road, is often the product of a paschal experience of death and resurrection, of ordeal and victory. However, so as not to become selfishly stuck in a material sort of practice of celibate life without real love, and so as not to grow hardened in a choice one puts up with because there is no going back, the celibate ideal has to be constantly renewed, be its consequences what they may.

This realistic approach absolutely has to be present in any introductory training programme, which must prophetically anticipate what is likely to happen. But it ought also to be present in all the opportunities the Church has to offer in the sphere of on-going training and especially in those high moments of spiritual life which ought to punctuate this continual verification in a dimension of growth in the call to priestly holiness.

Conclusion

Training for priestly celibacy is a synthesis of nature and grace, of ecclesial mediation and personal responsibility, of free choice of giving and of loving concern for the friendship that Christ offers, to be lived in a growing dynamic of faithfulness. As John Paul II says: «Celibacy is to be considered as a special grace, as a gift: ‘Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given’ (Mt 19:11). It is a grace which does not dispense with, but most definitely counts on, a conscious and free response on the part of the receiver. This charism of the Spirit also brings with it the grace for the receiver to remain faithful to it for all his life and to be able, generously and joyfully, to discharge its concomitant commitments.»¹² Training collaborates with grace in unity of intention and in docility to the demands of the Holy Spirit, so that celibacy for the sake of the kingdom, the precious pearl of priestly life in the Church, may today too be a shining sign of the presence of Christ, our supreme Model and Master.

NOTES

1. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 29.
2. *Ibid.*, n.44.
3. *Ibid.*, n. 50.
4. Cf *Sacerdotalis coelibatus*, nn. 17-34.
5. Cf Decree *Optatam totius*, n. 8.

6. To the emperor's question: «what do you hold dearest in Christianity?» the startled John replied: «what we hold dearest in Christianity is Christ himself. Him and all that comes from him.»

7. Cf *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 44.

8. Cf also the points set out in the Decree *Optatam totius*, n. 10.

9. Cf *Educational guidelines of training for priestly celibacy*, n. 47.

10. Cf *Pastores dabo vobis*, nn. 70 & 88.

ii. *op. cit.*, nn. 67-69.

12. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 50.