

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – B
1 February 2009

Things need to be seen in their proper context. Let me give you an example:

It was confirmation – and in the middle of the ceremony, one of the confirmands (those being confirmed) stood up and said in a loud voice, “You can go to hell, Bishop.”

What was happening here? Was that boy making a very bold statement what he didn’t really want to be confirmed? Well, let’s look at the **context** to understand what really happened here:

Before his outburst, the Bishop had asked the children, “What happens if you die with a mortal sin on your soul?” And the boy dutifully gave the correct answer, “You can go to hell, Bishop.” NOW it make sense!

Let’s get a context for today’s 2nd reading: first of all, to whom does Saint Paul write this letter? The Church at Corinth. What do you know about Corinth?

- ? Corinth was a busy and prosperous Greek city
- ? A hub of trade and cultural exchange between the western and eastern Mediterranean.
- ? It was a seaport city – so there are sailors everywhere – and they didn’t just *swear* like sailors, they *lived* like them (my apologies to any naval military personnel)
- ? In Corinth, every possible kind of vice flourished!
- ? Drinks and drugs, wine and women – it was a very immoral place
- ? And in the midst of this were the Christians – who were fighting **valiantly** to live **Christian lives** in the midst of a **corrupt** society (does that sound familiar?)
- ? Here’s what’s happening:
 - o Most of these Christians are converts – **adult** converts to Christianity. They didn’t grow up in the Church.
 - o But living in this corrupt society
 - o They found it easier to live their faith by trying to avoid corruption by abandoning their family and work and social relations.

Here is our **context** for today’s 2nd reading.

- ? Saint Paul encourages the Corinthians not to **abandon** their normal lives, but to continue in the same state of life they were in when they became believers.
- ? And so here, in this context, Saint Paul gives them this advice:

I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world,

how she may please her husband. I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction.

Paul gives them his opinion about an issue that was very controversial back then – and it is **still** controversial today: celibacy for the sake of the kingdom.

- ? Contrary to certain books and movies, like the *DaVinci Code*, Jesus was NEVER married.
- ? The **Church** was His spouse – and He gave His life **entirely** to her service.
- ? Saint Paul was following in Jesus’ footsteps, and he recommends that the unmarried Christian in Corinth *consider* doing the same thing.

From the **beginnings** of the Church – of Christianity, we see consecrated virginity and celibacy put forward as a **beautiful vocation** in the Church.

Is this how **we** look at celibacy and virginity? Or,

- ? do we think that celibacy is an unnatural burden?
- ? do we think that celibacy is an oppressive rule **imposed** on candidates for priesthood?
- ? Do we think that celibacy is the reason for the “priest shortage?”
- ? Do we think that celibacy is the root of the priest sex-abuse scandal?

Hearing Saint Paul today, let’s look at some reasons why this God-given vocation is such a wonderful **gift** to the Church.

First, there is what’s called the “**Christological reason.**”

This reason says that the purpose of consecrated celibacy and virginity actually **helps reveal and remind everyone** of **who Christ REALLY is.**

- ? A woman who responds to God’s call in her life by giving herself, **body and soul to Christ** as a consecrated religious, reminds the world that she has given her life to Jesus – a **real person**, not just a myth or vague idea.
- ? Celibacy and virginity remind us that Jesus is someone who **loves us** and who can **be love by us.**

Jesus is a **real person** who **really loves us** and **really desires our love** – the vocation of consecrated virginity reminds us of this reality in a unique way.

A man who receives and accepts (and that’s a key here – the grace to live it must be accepted) – the man who accepts the grace to be a celibate priest shows the world another side of Christ’s love: His **pastoral, fatherly** side.

- ? Through the ordained priest, **Christ Himself pastures** His flock, **feeds** them with the Eucharist, **intercedes** for them through the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, **heals** them with the Sacraments of anointing and confession.

- ? Have you ever thought about this: societies or governments that want to destroy or eliminate the Catholic Church always begin by **banishing, belittling, discrediting or murdering** priests and bishops.
- ? We don't always remember that, for example, the **Nazi Holocaust** also targeted **1000's** of Catholic priests.
- ? The **anti-Catholic revolution** in Mexico in the early 1900's began by expelling priests and bishops. (in 1925, there were 4500 priests in Mexico – by 1935, there were only 334)
- ? Look at today's society: who are ridiculed and belittled the most? Your priests and bishops – **ESPECIALLY** through the sexual abuse scandal.
 - o Is it scandalous that priests have abused their power and molested children? **YES!**
 - o This cannot be denied, ignored or tolerated – and some of these cases are absolutely horrific in their scale – and the damage to those abused and their family is incalculable.
 - o However, in the best surveys available – reported on CNN.com – between 1950 & 2002, there were 4000 priests accused – while 110,000 priests have served the Catholics of this country. This equals only 4% - the other 96% of your priests are as scandalized by their brothers as you are. The percentage among protestant ministers and public school teachers is **ALSO** 4% (or actually even a bit higher.)
 - o Despite this fact, it is the **Church** and her **priests** who are attacked – because if we can get rid of the priests, we can get rid of the Church

A priest who promises to live a celibate life isn't negatively and insanely **renouncing** his capacity to love – rather, he is positively committing himself to **live love to the full** through his **total dedication** to the little part of the Church that has been entrusted to him – his parish.

- ? The celibate priest reflects, in a brilliant way, Christ's **total dedication** to the Church as a whole.
- ? The priest is a **mirror of Christ himself**, who lived as a celibate man, who “married” the Church, and who dedicated His entire life to his bride (the Church).

Another reason for the celibate priesthood is the “**eschatological reason.**”

- ? Eschatology deals with the last things: death, judgment, heaven & hell.
- ? Christ taught that marriage is “until death do us part” – that in heaven, there is no marriage.
- ? This is not because marriage is bad or incomplete, but the intimacy and communion that is *supposed* to exist in marriage is **replaced** by the joy and fulfillment that comes with perfect communion with God (and the saints) in heaven.
- ? The celibate priest is a reminder of this reality:
 - o All the pleasures and joys and meaning we find in this life **will come to an end.**
 - o This is what led Saint Paul, last week, to say “From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.”

- This world is NOT all there is! Celibate priests and those living the consecrated religious life are actually **billboards pointing to heaven!**

There's also an **ecclesial reason**: ecclesial means "having to do with the Church."

- ? A woman who consecrates herself to Christ is a **living image** of what the Church really is: the **Bride of Christ**, the one whom Christ loves **so much** that He sacrifices His own life for her – for us!
- ? **Celibacy** is a **mirror** that shows the **universality** of God's love for **all people**, because the celibate priest or consecrated religious is **wholly available** to serve all of God's people, as Saint Paul pointed out in today's Second Reading.
- ? The man who is ordained a priest and has willingly accepted a celibate life, since he has no wife or family of his own, can be **more available** to serve the Church.
- ? He can dedicate **all his time, attention, energy and love** to the demands of his ministry
 - Not that he doesn't have (and NEED) some "time off" to his own spiritual and emotional growth and wholeness.
 - Not that he doesn't need time for study and preparation of sermons and talks
 - Not that he doesn't need time "out of the office" to be out visiting the people.

St Francis de Sales had an experience that **illustrated** this.

- ? When he was a bishop in Switzerland in the 1500's, during the Protestant Reformation, he gave **personal instruction** to many Protestants who were interested in the Catholic Church.
- ? One **elderly Protestant lady** had been receiving instruction for **a long time**.
- ? She repeatedly entered into **extended arguments** with the patient bishop.
- ? Her appointments became more and more **frequent**, until finally she was coming **every day** with some **problem or doubt** she wanted resolved.
- ? One day she solemnly proclaimed that her **only** remaining difficulty with the Catholic Church was the **celibacy** of the Catholic clergy.
- ? Calmly, Saint Francis explained to her that a celibate priest reflects Christ's **total love** for the Church, and is also **more available** to serve the people.
- ? Then he paused, and added with a **sly smile**:
- ? "For instance, madam, you will readily understand that if I had a wife and children to take care of, I would be **unable to talk with you so often** about your religious difficulties."

A short time later, she became a Catholic.

But another **fantastic** reason for celibacy is that it reminds us of the **true dignity and beauty of marriage!**

- ? Some people don't understand or **misunderstand** the Church's esteem for celibacy.
- ? They think that it is a subtle criticism of marriage, as if marriage were something to be looked down on – something "less."

But, this has NEVER been what the Church taught – because it's not what Christ taught:

- ? God invented marriage as an intimate union of a man & woman – for their good and mutual existence and encouragement & fulfillment AND for the continuation of the human race through children.
- ? Just as celibacy points to heaven, **so does marriage** – the intimate union between a man and women reveals an image of the union we'll have with **everyone** in heaven.
- ? Where was Jesus' first miracle? At a wedding!
- ? What was Jesus' favorite image of the kingdom of God? A wedding banquet!

The Church has never denied or belittled marriage by **demanding** celibacy for her priests, but rather has revealed the dignity of marriage through a celibate priesthood.

God doesn't call **all of us** to a life of celibacy or consecrated virginity – Saint Paul makes that clear in this letter to the Corinthians.

But, by calling **some** of us to that life, he gives us a **beautiful gift**

- ? That reminds us of God's personal love and sacrifice for each of us
- ? That reminds us of the deep, sacramental, intimate and live-giving meaning of marriage
- ? That puts in our lives men & women who are always ready to **guide and pray for us** in Christ's name.

Celibacy is not abnormal or unhealthy or even “un-Biblical” – rather it is a great gift and grace.

Sure, as a man, as a woman, we still need some privacy, down time, time to rest and relax and vacation, but our lives become a gift for others

- ? to be available
- ? to be giving
- ? to be an image of Christ's dedication to His bride, the Church
- ? to be an image of Christ's total love for each one of us

Perhaps today, as Saint Paul speaks to us about the “unmarried being anxious about the things of the Lord” and the married being “anxious about the things of the world,” perhaps we do best to remember his first words today: “Be free of anxieties!”

Whether we are married or celibate or in the consecrated life, God gives each of us the grace we need to follow him – to give our lives for others – to imitate the loving sacrifice of Christ by our loving sacrifice of self for our family or for our parish.