

H O R I Z O N

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE



Celibacy

Fall 1998

Volume 24 Number 1

EDITOR	Carol Schuck Scheiber
EDITORIAL STAFF	Catherine Bertrand, SSND Mary Ann Hamer, OSF
EDITORIAL BOARD	Deborah Davis, PHJC Peter J. Etzel, S.J. Carol Mucha, RSM Dianne Perry, SSND Diana Rawlings, ASC Thomas Sullivan, FSC

One-year subscription rates:

\$17.00 each for 1 or 2

\$15.00 each for 3 to 5

\$13.00 each for 6 or more

Two-year single subscription rates:

\$30.00

(Outside U.S. add \$4.00 per year for each subscription.)

Single copies are available at \$6.00 each.

Send new subscriptions, renewals, and change of address to HORIZON, NRVC Office, 5420 S. Cornell Ave. #105, Chicago, IL 60615.

HORIZON (ISSN 1042-8461) is published quarterly by the National Religious Vocation Conference, 5420 S. Cornell Avenue #105, Chicago, IL 60615. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to HORIZON, 5420 S. Cornell Avenue #105, Chicago, IL 60615.

TO SUBMIT COPY FOR PUBLICATION:

The editorial board seeks out certain authors to write on specific themes. While each issue is generally organized around a theme, articles written on topics unrelated to the theme will be considered. Manuscripts should be submitted to the Editor, NRVC Office, 5420 S. Cornell Ave. #105, Chicago, IL 60615. Copy should be typewritten double spaced on 8 1/2 X 11 inch white paper. Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope."

- ◆ **FEATURE ARTICLES** should be limited to 3000 words (10 pages).
- ◆ **NEW HORIZONS** is a feature for vocation ministers to submit a description or the actual specific practical vocation and discernment programs, processes and resources which are presently employed or being piloted. Copy should not exceed 1500 words or 5 pages.
- ◆ **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR** are welcome as commentary on previous articles or Guest View editorials. Letters should be limited to 250 words and will be published as space permits.

All accepted material is subject to editing.

H O R I Z O N

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

VOLUME 24

NUMBER 1

FALL 1998

Celibacy

FEATURES	How to talk about celibacy with candidates	3
	<i>An interview with James Halstead, OSA and Joan Scanlon, OP</i>	
	How to encourage community members to talk about celibacy with candidates	10
	<i>by Carole Riley, CDP</i>	
	Addressing celibacy issues with gay and lesbian candidates	15
	<i>Robert Nugent, SDS</i>	
	Resources on celibate intimacy	26
	The gifts of celibate friendship and intimacy	27
	<i>Janet K. Ruffing, RSM</i>	

The gifts of celibate friendship and intimacy

Janet K. Ruffing, RSM

During the last two decades many religious have spent a great deal of time reflecting on and exploring the relationship between sexuality and our spirituality. Men and women in the formation process have also been affected in significant ways by major changes in understandings and attitudes about human sexuality resulting from the sexual revolution in the 60s and 70s. However, I continue to be surprised at the lack of integration in their sexual selves that many religious demonstrate as well as a relative lack of experiential awareness of the profound connections between sexuality, intimacy, relationships, and spirituality.

In this essay, I am focusing on celibate sexuality and its forms of love and intimacy in an entirely positive way. From my perspective celibacy is a path of divine and human love, or it is not rooted in the Christian gospel and discipleship of Jesus. As such, it is a charism, literally a gift to those of us who have received it and discovered the ability to love this way. As a charism, celibacy serves the good of the community. So it is not simply for us but for others as well. If celibacy is a choice to love in particular ways without denigrating the positive value of sexual loving, we need to deepen our understanding of how we love God and others in lively, convincing ways. I believe we want our celibacy to lead to an expansion of lovingness.

Vita Consecrata, the synod document, embraces these positive values related to celibacy. It repeatedly affirms that celibate loving chooses God as one's absolute good, leading to dedicating oneself to God with an undivided heart through the Holy Spirit. This experience of the Spirit evokes a response of total love for God and of one's brothers and sisters. It is a great exchange of love from God, Jesus, the Spirit, an immersion in the Divine Mystery, and a search for relationship with God as an all encompassing reality. As this love develops it becomes a profoundly non-exclusive way of loving others. Celibacy which is experienced in this religiously motivated and empowered way is clearly rooted in the example and experience of Jesus as both celibate and alive with love and passion for God and the basileia. If our way of love actually appears to others as the synod hopes as "a joyful and liberating experience" (#88), we will actually feel our passion and consciously sublimate and transmute it in an intricate process of relationship and caring activity.

The synod document also asserts the necessity that formation programs cultivate "the interior freedom of consecrated persons, their affective maturity, their ability to communicate with others, especially in their own community, their serenity of spirit, their compassion for those who are suffering, their love for the truth, and a

Janet Ruffing is an associate professor in spirituality and spiritual direction in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University in New York. She holds a Ph.D. in Christian spirituality from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif. and is a member of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

Currently she is on a faculty fellowship writing on mysticism and socially engaged contemplation and spiritual direction while co-ministering in the Mercy Collaborative Novitiate in St. Louis, Mo.

correspondence between their actions and their words" (#71). These are marvelous ideals. The only difficulty is that the document doesn't tell us how to do this nor, most likely, did anyone in our own initial formation processes.

Connecting our passion to God

I wonder how you are feeling right now. Do you experience in your own lives a consuming passion for God and a corresponding passion for apostolic life? How is this passion real for you? Are there times when you don't experience this passionate energy? And what is life like for you then? There can be a dynamic energy within the celibate heart. We can be persons who love profoundly, but only if we are able to connect our love and our passion to the God of desire who evokes and awakens that passion in us. Barbara Fiand advocates this approach to celibacy:

In a culture where gratification is the norm, consecrated celibacy stands for doing without, for God-dependency, for looking deeper, for waiting, for vigilance, and for another kind of fulfillment. Celibate loving, regardless of how empowering it may be ... ultimately speaks of aloneness and longing. But as it draws us, over the span of a lifetime, ever more deeply into the love that alone can fill our heart's desire, it will also and inexorably, lead us through loneliness into [a] "final solitude," where it will reveal us to ourselves as the living symbols of all of humanity's ultimate and ontological homesickness for God. (Fiand, 95)

And she goes on to claim:

If celibacy is to open up for us the grace that loving one another with authenticity holds in store for us, we will need to accept intimacy—its power and its pain—as part of our lives. We will need to learn about trust and commitment, discipline and self-gift;

about perseverance and faithfulness and passion. Celibacy today, celebrated and lived healthily, needs to embrace the flow of sexual energy, to acknowledge it as good—as essential, in fact, to our incarnation. It needs to channel this energy with intent into the numerous creative and life-giving forms of loving that cry out for expression in our love-starved world. (98)

We will hardly be able to offer much to our love-starved world if we ourselves feel love-starved. I believe with Barbara Fiand and many others that intimacy and relationship, in our case non-genital modes, provide the basic foundation for both divine-human loving and for reciprocal human loving. Beverly Musgrave, a colleague of mine, asserts that one cannot make an authentic human choice to be celibate without self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-esteem; without the ability to be intimate and to be in relationship, without the ability to be truly spiritual, and without addressing and facing psychological factors of human motivation, both conscious and unconscious.¹ These key features point to a life-long process in the adventure of love and relationship, beginning with our relationship to ourselves.

If authentically chosen celibacy then, is a way of loving and relationship, we will have to embrace it in a radically body-affirming way. It is so easy to become confused here because of the distortions and dislocations in our religious tradition and in our sex-obsessed western culture. Our tradition has so focused on the renunciatory aspects of celibacy, so invested itself in controlling sexuality, that we have often suppressed, repressed and tyrannized our physical-sexual selves. We have so easily severed the connections between celibacy and incarnation that we fail to experience our sexual selves as participants in the delight and sensuousness of this life, in this earthly creation. The emphasis since Vatican II has been on celibacy as an eschatological sign of the coming age. It told us

We will hardly be able to offer much to our love-starved world if we ourselves feel love-starved.

very little about how to live it healthily right here and now. What about our celibate loving is good news for us and for others? Or is our passion, desiring and loving “on hold” until the next life? In a new holistic, interconnected form of spirituality, celibacy becomes a non-exploitive way of relating not only to our brothers and sisters but to the fragile planet and all of its creatures as well. Such relating becomes a vehicle for communion with God, with our earth, and with others precisely through the gift of our own embodied presence and care in the great circulation of love that is the community of co-equal disciples. Our body-selves are the sacraments of our self-presence in the world. If we appropriate our sexuality in this broader and deeper way, we can more easily recognize how it is implicated in every relationship including our relationship with God.

To make this more concrete, a few definitions might bring some clarity to our reflections. I follow here James Nelson as he describes both spirituality and sexuality:

By spirituality I mean not only the conscious religious disciplines and practices through which human beings relate to God, but more inclusively the whole style and meaning of our relationship to that which we perceive as of ultimate worth and power. This includes disciplines and practices, but also myths, symbols, and rituals, informal as well as formal. It includes the affective as well as the cognitive. Significantly, spirituality includes the ways in which our relatedness to the ultimate affects our understandings and feelings of relatedness to everyone and everything else. (5)

By sexuality I mean not only physiological arousal and genital activity, but also much more. While human sexuality is not the whole of our personhood, it is a basic dimension of that personhood. While it does not determine all thought, feeling, and action, it does permeate and affect all of these. Sexuality

is our way of being in the world as female or male persons. It involves our appropriation of characteristics socially defined as feminine or masculine. It includes our affectional-sexual orientation toward those of the opposite and/or same sex. It is our attitudes toward ourselves and others as *body-selves*. It is our capacity for sensuousness. It is all of this.

The intimate relation between sexuality and spirituality is evident if one believes, as I do, that sexuality is both a symbol and a means of communication and communion. The mystery of sexuality is the mystery of the human need to reach out for the physical and spiritual embrace of others. Sexuality thus expresses God’s intention that people find authentic humanness not in isolation but in relationship. In sum, sexuality always involves much more than what we do with our genitals. More fundamentally, it is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion, both creaturely and divine. (5-6)

Understanding how we relate

If we agree with these definitions as the ideals to which we aspire, what are the implications for our own lives and for formation itself? To what extent do we experience ourselves as genuinely relational? To what extent has our training, especially in relationship to developing the disciplines for sexual control, actually inhibited our ability to relate in authentically caring ways? These are not easy questions. They are also deeply gender-related questions. Our entire familial and cultural histories have already given us not always helpful images and expectations about both the value and the shape of relationships. As women, we have been conditioned to be the “tenders” of relationship. We have often specialized in a certain set of care-giving relational skills. However, we may not have learned equally well that we are, indeed, selves, who are worthy of receiving

In a new holistic, interconnected form of spirituality, celibacy becomes a non-exploitive way of relating not only to our brothers and sisters but to the fragile planet and all of its creatures as well.

One of the amazing gifts of religious life to the church and the world has been its tendency since its earliest inception toward a vision of mutuality in relationship.

love as well as giving love, that we are valued for who we are as women as well as for what we do; that we may be passionate and creative, self accepting and relational. As men, we have been conditioned to define ourselves as separate, as not needing the nurture of empathic connection. We have been trained to cut off ourselves and our feelings and carry within ourselves a deep and wounded loneliness. We have been trained to equate intimacy with sex. To embrace celibacy then threatens all access to intimacy since we may not have the interpersonal skills for achieving and maintaining emotional intimacy. We then place all our energy and needs into our work and push deep into our unconscious our deep unmet needs for love and intimacy which can then overwhelm and surprise us in various forms of promiscuous or abusive relationships.

I believe formative processes need to promote a new set of ascetical disciplines—this time relational ones. We need to accept ourselves and our men and women in the formation process as persons in relation and in an on-going process of psycho-sexual maturing, integration, and relationship. We need to create a climate in which it is permissible to talk about both struggles and confusions in these areas. And we need to do this in a way that is both safe and confidential. At the same time, we need to be aware of the accumulating information about the conditions under which religious and clergy violate professional boundaries because some are so unconscious of the privilege and power which accrues to the professional, religious role. All of this means that the real training ground for relational development is within a situation of true peers and of adult modeling. The shape of our gender conditioning makes it extremely difficult in our church for men and women to relate to one another from a position of true equality. This is so because of the normal male dominance in our culture in general which has been maintained as a sacral necessity

in the church. Heterosexism dominates over bisexuality and homosexuality, creating another form of power imbalance. And none of us begins or lives religious life in a situation of true equality based on the natural sets of gifts and relational skills which constitutes our personhood at any given moment.

One of the amazing gifts of religious life to the church and the world has been its tendency since its earliest inception toward a vision of mutuality in relationship which eliminates all forms of social power-relations, including gendered ones. This is the assumption of celibate women and men who have attempted to live in some form of community as equals through the centuries. If we were truly to appropriate this possibility, religious would demonstrate to one another and to the larger community relationships of true brotherhood and sisterhood. One of the key Gospel insights religious embody when they are healthy and relational is an ability to love across the borders and boundaries of such power relations. This feature is sometimes identified as a universal or radical love.

However, this kind of abstraction is not particularly helpful. All of us have come to know we can not love people abstractly; we can only love each person in our circle of relationship and ministry, individual person by individual person. Now, these rich and varied loves are always particular. They are often accompanied by the normal relational dynamics of attraction, infatuation, romantic attachment, liking, desiring, etc. If we too easily confuse our bodily desires toward genitality with these normal dynamics of intense feeling states related to any relationship of deepening intimacy, we are likely to deny significant aspects of the experience such as the bodily feeling states. We are even more likely to withdraw from relationship rather than suffer the confusions and disequilibrium of learning to love the other. We are often too afraid to risk vulnerability and self-

disclosure and so develop and grow in our ability to make and keep friends.

Needed: a vocabulary for loving

I believe that our cultures are singularly lacking in a rich and nuanced vocabulary for all the myriad forms of loving that make up a human life. Above all, we lack appropriate models for celibate adult friendships of every form, across genders, across sexual orientations, across generations. Further, the prior community conditioning of most middle-aged formators today, sadly neglected these forms of relationship in favor of building community which was often a “let’s pretend we’re all friends” fantasy without ever allowing friendships to flower into a truly open and generative form of love. More often, all satisfying relationships were sacrificed to institutional values and goals. We were literally taught not to relate but to be cordial on a superficial level. For those who entered later, a different form of peer bonding emerged which often took the form of close and exclusive dyadic bonding which in many cases is more of a survival mode—an intimate defense against the continuing change and sometimes chaos in religious life itself. So one clung to a peer or two rather than learning how to relate to the complexity of the community itself. These dyadic bonds are often based more on security needs than on growth needs. They are rarely open to inclusion of others and may not be particularly generative. I am describing a celibate relational style which is capable of deep friendship, collegueship, and affective bonding, but which does not result in coupling.

There is, I believe, a bittersweet quality to the whole network of our intimate relationships. We relate in real and authentic ways; we love and are loved. We form these relationships first by reaching out to others in love and receive gratefully that which returns to us often in unexpected and surprising ways. But there is also a

continual relinquishment of those same loves. There is a parting of friends as well as a meeting of friends. Celibate loving requires this ability to recognize and place all of these loves in an ordered fashion in relationship to the love which moves the sun and stars—God’s love reaching out to us in and through each precious human relationship as well as deeply within our own solitude. John Dunne talks about this experience of the absence of love which requires the contemplative practice of “remembering love” as its antidote. He says:

There is a passing through fire and deep water, I find too, after the parting of friends, there is lack and loss and letting go, and there is remembering, becoming aware of my real feelings, becoming aware of love I never really knew I had....There is such a thing as remembering a love that has been forgotten. I realize I am loved and I have been loved all along; I realize I do love and I have loved all along; I remember love. What is more, passing through fire and deep water, through the pain of loss, I realize there is a love in all our loves. I have known this. I have known it without knowing I knew it. And now I come to remember to know I knew, to know I know of love. “All love is lost but upon God alone,” or when all is lost love begins again with God. (85)

What remains challenging about celibate loving is that it usually remains impossible to project a particular friend as part of our lives for a lifetime. Whenever we welcome another significant relationship, we never know how long this person will be part of our day-to-day lives. I find it very consoling to trust an insight of C. G. Jung, “Everything which belongs to an individual’s life shall enter into it.” We might offer the paraphrase: “Everyone who belongs to an individual’s life shall enter into it.” At moments of transition, new ministry settings, new communities, or geographies, we simultaneously let go of the sustaining

What remains challenging about celibate loving is that it usually remains impossible to project a particular friend as part of our lives for a lifetime.

I do not believe we ever really come to know ourselves or to know God if we do not develop solid friendships which endure over the years, although often not for a lifetime.

group of intimates we have developed where we were and walk in a trusting, grieving unknowing to the next place and the next friends although at the moment we do not know who they might be. This takes both courage and a capacity to suffer loss gracefully. It is part of the loneliness, yet it need not be an unhappy loneliness. These times thrust us back onto God. They invite us to trust anew that ultimately all love comes from God and returns to God—that God will console us in our losses if we will turn to God in those losses. It is never easy to welcome “the truth which really applies to everyone, not just us, that the persons of my life transcend my life and have lives of their own, and letting them transcend my life, letting them have lives and cares of their own, letting them be, is not easy, letting go of them really and being thankful for them.” (Dunne, 91)

We live in this mystery of these gifts of love friendship, but to do so we must be willing to actually suffer the vicissitudes of relationship and of love. This is not a perfect process; we will and do make mistakes. But that is all part of the learning as we discover how to express ourselves in trustworthy relationships and discover the ones that aren't. Many of us have learned simply to live on the surface of relationship in order to preserve our celibacy or to live an ideal which was inadequate in its vision of relationship in our lives. If so, we live lives of deep loneliness which are never really assuaged by experiences of love and connection. I do not believe we ever really come to know ourselves or to know God if we do not develop solid friendships which endure over the years, although often not for a lifetime. We understand that God is love and that all human loves lead right back to God. By entering the adventure of love and friendship, we risk self-disclosure and vulnerability so that we might enjoy the gift and pain of intimacy. In so doing, we discover how to love and discover our personal and inter-

personal boundaries. These deep and loving relationships however poorly acknowledged or named help create in us the capacity for ever deeper experiences of such relationship with God's own self. We discover that God, too, desires intimacy with us and lures us toward relationships of mutuality and deep love. †

Works Cited

Dunne, John S. *Love's Mind: An Essay on Contemplative Life*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993.

Fiand, Barbara. *Wrestling With God: Religious Life in Search of Its Soul*. New York: Crossroad, 1996.

Nelson, James B. *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1983.

Vita Consecrata: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father John Paul II. Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1996.

1. Dr. Beverly Musgrave, Fordham University, developed these concepts in a team-taught workshop at the Marianella in Dublin, “The Self in Relationship: Living Celibately, Experiencing Contemplation,” June, 1996 and 1998.