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EUNUCHS FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM

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A reflection on celibacy in the light of monastic tradition and experience

“Celibacy is central to the monastic life”¹. I wonder how many of us would find ourselves in agreement with that statement of Abbot Basil Hume, as he then was, given in a conference to the Community here at Ampleforth. In contrast to clerical celibacy, which has not always been obligatory, it is certainly a core value, a *sine qua non* of monastic life and there has never been any suggestion during the long history of monasticism that following a monastic way of life did not include the practice of life-long celibacy, not just as an ideal, but as an essential part of the response to a monastic vocation.

While there may have been some uncertainty about the original meaning of the term *monachos*, even as early as the fourth century some saw it as a reference to a hermit or solitary, there is plenty of evidence that the word was used of coenobites as well as those living alone and the *Rule of St Benedict 1980* (RB 80) seems to have established conclusively that the original meaning indicated a single person in the sense of one who is unmarried². While different kinds of monks are differentiated in both east and west, monks, hermits, anchorites, coenobites, sarabites etc, all have shared a common dedication to a celibate life.

There has never been any suggestion that such a life is not costly, sacrificial and demanding, and, as Christ himself acknowledges in the Gospel, it is not suitable for everyone: “It is not everyone who can accept what I have said but only those to whom it has been granted” (Matthew 19:11). Indeed, to some in all ages it has seemed an unnatural way of life contrary to one of the ordinances of creation. The first command in Scripture is God’s injunction to human beings “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28), while in the parallel account of creation in Genesis God says that “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18), hence the creation of Eve who is created out of the side of Adam - not out of his head to be over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled by him, but to be alongside him as an antidote to loneliness and to be next to his heart as the object of his love and desire. This is clearly seen as the norm for most people. It was part of the Creator’s plan for ensuring the propagation of the human race.

In first century Palestine, for example, the compelling impulse for this would be readily understood in a world where life expectancy was on average around 25 years and four out

¹ Basil Hume, *Searching for God*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1977, p. 51.

² *The Rule of St Benedict* (ed T Fry), The Liturgical Press, 1981, pp. 301-21

of a hundred people lived to be over 50. Similar pressures would also have been felt in fourth-century Egypt. In such a context, women were expected to produce children in fairly large numbers, given the high infant mortality rates, the need for a work-force and a form of social security for those who did reach old age. The complementarity of the sexes established a necessary dependence for the survival of the human race and led to independence from parents and a unique bond between husband and wife. “This is why a man leaves his father and mother and the two become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:5). This relationship is permanent and indissoluble by any human agency, an ideal that the disciples of Jesus recognise as difficult and demanding: “If such is the case of a man with his wife it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19:10). St Paul quotes the same text from Genesis in his letter to the Ephesians where the love between man and woman is seen to be analogous to the love of Christ for his Church, a spousal relationship that will be developed later by writers in connection with monastic life.

The Second Vatican Council made it clear that whatever the popular understandings may have been in the past, the Church in no way sees marriage as second-best or inferior to a celibate life even though *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II’s 1996 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life, can call the religious life ‘objectively superior’, another way of life that is only better for those who are called to it.

God is the author of marriage.

“The Lord, wishing to bestow special gifts of grace and divine love on married love, has restored, perfected and elevated it. ...Christ our Lord has abundantly blessed this love, which is rich...coming as it does from the spring of divine love and modelled on Christ’s own union with the church”³. As is well-known, one of the unintended effects of this was the 1970s crisis which saw significant numbers abandoning or seeking dispensation from their vow of celibacy.

In more recent times there has been a renewed questioning of whether celibacy is unnatural. In an African context, for example, I recall frequent articles in newspapers, often written by fundamentalist Protestants, claiming that celibacy was not only contrary to nature but that such a life was also unliveable. The claim was that the many spectacular failures to live a celibate life simply confirmed this, leading inevitably to charges of hypocrisy against those who claimed to be capable of living it when in fact they were not.

In support of this argument were cited the Genesis texts already quoted and the fact that in the Old Testament there seemed to be little or no value placed on a celibate life. Indeed the promise made to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), unfulfilled in his own lifetime, that he would be the father of a great nation, required marriage and the propagation of children to be

³ Gaudium et Spes 48-51, Vatican Council II, ed A Flannery OP, Costello Publishing Company, 1996 pp.219-225.

normative. Barrenness was seen as a disgrace, even a reproach from God that only the bearing of children could assuage. The need to produce children applied to all, including priests, though there were restrictions on serving at the altar in the immediate aftermath of sexual relations. The human co-operation required to see the fulfilment of God's promise to Israel fulfilled has accounted for the unimportance of celibacy in Judaism. Rabbi Eliezer said: "Any Jew who does not have a wife is not a man". Cf. the common African view that a youth becomes a man after he has begotten his first child.

The only exception to this in the Old Testament is the prophet Jeremiah. "You shall not take a wife nor shall you have sons and daughters" (Jeremiah 16:2). The prophet's life is to be symbolic of the fact that disaster is about to come upon the people of God because of their sinfulness, so there is no point in engaging in normal human activity such as the producing of children: "They will die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall become like dung on the surface of the ground" (Jeremiah 16:4). Jeremiah rebels against the hardship of his vocation and thinks of alternatives but finally submits to God's call, strengthened but still suffering (Jeremiah 20:7-11). He makes his choice as a result of what he believes about his vocation, however much it may be an outrage to sensibility, acknowledging that to deny it also involves great loss. His refraining from marriage is a sign of just how desperate the situation is but there seems to be no suggestion that to do so normally has any value in itself. Marriage was seen to be normative within Judaism and there was pressure on all to marry. Equally, other prophets, such as Hosea, were told to marry, albeit in unusual circumstances, again as a way of re-enforcing the message entrusted to him (Hosea 1:2).

Exceptions to married life have been cited but they were rare and not the norm. The exact form of celibacy practised by such quasi-monastic communities as the Essenes and the Therapeutae is not altogether clear. Some did refrain from marriage, though whether permanently or for a limited period is still a matter of debate. (In parenthesis one might also mention the Beta Israel or Falashas, the Jews of Ethiopia, who did have a form of monasticism which included celibacy from the fifteenth until the twentieth century, though this may have been the product of syncretism with Christianity and seems to have died out as a result of external pressures to make this community conform more to the norms of the rest of Judaism).

Some New Testament scholars have thought that John the Baptist may have had links with the Qumran community, but again this is based more on presumption than evidence. Certainly he appears in the wilderness as a solitary and ascetical figure, a lone reviver of the old prophetic traditions, who has foregone many of the conventions of normal life, as seen by his dress and diet, and seems to have been unmarried, too. Again, his way of life is linked with his mission as one who points away from himself and prepares the way for the coming of the Lamb of God who is about to appear. That his role as forerunner precludes marriage is the universal testimony of the tradition about him.

Our Lord is born into a normal Jewish family for whom family life was central to the practice of religion. As a human being, he inherits all the beliefs of the people of God about their unique place in God's providential plan and spends the first thirty years of his life subject to his parents at Nazareth (Luke 2:51; 3:23). The Holy Family of Jesus, Joseph and Mary has often been held up as a paradigm of family life. But within that context there are indications in the teaching of Jesus that the demands of the Kingdom of God go beyond the norms of familial relationships: "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30). Indeed, the reactions to the person of Jesus may cause division within families: "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death" (Mark 13:12). Moreover, relationships within the kingdom depend on more than blood ties: "Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking at those who sat around him, he said: 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mark 3:34).

There is no suggestion in the Gospel that Jesus was married and again the universal tradition of the Church is that he was not. Following a life lived at the family home in Nazareth and a three year itinerant public ministry accompanied by disciples, including a number of women, he is crucified and dies on the cross. Jesus is believed by Christians to be true God and true man, fully divine and fully human. Since there is nothing lacking in his humanity, therefore, since he is single, it cannot be said that to be unmarried is to be less than human or is to lead an unnatural life. Christ made himself available to all as the man for others in a way that precluded the intimacy of a one-to-one relationship such as is involved in marriage. But in addition to this the Lord in the Gospel specifically mentions the fact that some will be called to live a celibate life for the sake of the kingdom of God. As has been seen, the discussion on divorce is followed by the saying on celibacy, though some have questioned whether this was the originally the *Sitz im Leben* of the latter saying⁴. As it stands, however, Jesus seems to rule out the possibility of divorce, though Matthew, perhaps following current debates within Rabbinic Judaism, allows unchastity as an exception. In response to the astonishment of the disciples at such an uncompromising stand – can anyone marry on these terms – Jesus replies: "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" (Matthew 19:11-12).

Here, celibacy is seen as something voluntarily embraced with its own motivation "for the sake of the Kingdom of God", even as a gift from God to those who are able to embrace it.

⁴ Daniel Rees *et al.* *Consider Your Call: Theology of Monastic Life Today*, SPCK 1978 p. 165

Elsewhere, the kingdom is seen as the reason for which it is worth giving up all else, including other things which may be good in themselves. It is part of that singleness of heart that is an essential part of the response to Jesus, at least for some who, like the disciples in Luke, are called to leave all to follow him (Luke 5:11).

The Kingdom of God announced by Jesus is present with his coming but awaits its completion in the future. However, there are anticipations of this, for example, in the miracles and also in celibacy since, as Jesus pointed out in his answer to the Sadducees about the resurrection, “when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). Hence the basis for the description of the monastic life as an ‘angelic life’, a concept particularly strong in Orthodox monasticism. The monk is seen as an eschatological sign, a witness to the fact that this life is short compared with the eternity with God in the hereafter. It has also been seen as an earnest of the transfiguration of the body – the divinisation of man who is, within the providential plan of God, to become a partaker of the divine nature.

As Cardinal Hume put it: “By your vow of celibacy you acknowledge that God is the object of all your desires; that he is the ultimate love which can satisfy the heart of man”⁵ though he himself seems to have been less impressed by the eschatological aspect: “The explanation given in modern times that it is ‘an eschatological dimension of the kingdom of God’ is not particularly helpful to me personally, though I can go along with it”⁶. Whether it is only a modern explanation is, I think, questionable. The monk whose life is a perpetual Lent is focussed on the Easter that lies ahead. It could perhaps be argued that it is under the unconscious influence of western secularism that this aspect of monastic life is seen as a modern phenomenon.

St Paul recommends celibacy in view of the impending ‘parousia’ which he expected in his own lifetime at least at the beginning of his apostolic work (1 Thess. 4:15). It is clear that he himself was unmarried: “I wish that all were as I myself am” (1 Cor. 7:7) *pace* Rabbi Eliaze, but he recognises that it is a gift not given to all. He advises the unmarried and widows to remain “as I am”, but if they are not capable of that “it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Cor. 7:7-9). He develops this further in the same chapter, though this has to be seen in the context of his eschatological expectations. “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided”. He adds “I say this not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:32ff.). That the unmarried man is free in a way that those with marital obligations cannot be has become one of the traditional arguments in favour of celibacy for those who are called to it. *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Decree on the Up-

⁵ Hume, *Searching for God*, p. 59.

⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 50.

to-date *Renewal of Religious Life*, acknowledges this freedom: “Chastity ‘for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’...must be esteemed an exceptional gift of grace. It uniquely frees the hearts of women and men so that they become more fervent in love for God and for all humanity”⁷.

While Paul is addressing a specific situation, a more realised view of eschatology can extend this beyond the immediate expectations concerning the Second Coming. Moreover, if marriage is seen as a gift or vocation then it also ceases to be a universal obligation.

As monks we are part of a tradition, then, that has always seen celibacy as an essential part of the monastic way of life. It is acknowledged that this will be a hardship, sacrificial and demanding and there is considerable discussion of how to live a celibate life in the monastic literature. Inevitably, the advances in knowledge in the human sciences will mean that we see the demands of celibacy in a different way. We stand on a different side of the Freudian divide, for example, and from our twenty-first century vantage point see the problems of celibacy in the light of our own perspectives and experience. The ancient understanding of physiology and anthropology will, of course, be different from ours but that does not mean the tradition has little to teach us concerning celibacy and its value. The early tradition brings to us, via Cassian and Benedict, elements of the eastern tradition which are needed to supplement and challenge our own insights. Let us examine some of the strands in that tradition to see what they might have to offer us in our understanding of the celibate life.

For the first monks the desert was the place of encounter with the demons and this involved sexual temptation of every kind. But it would be wrong to see that temptation in isolation or as having a central importance beyond all other sins. The present almost lubricious and prurient interest in such matters would probably have surprised the Desert Fathers. Peter Brown has written that despite the severity towards the demons of sexual temptation “this did not mean that most ascetical spiritual guides treated sexual temptation as uniquely alarming. Far from it – sexual desire was frequently overshadowed as a source of spiritual danger by the dull ache of pride, resentment and by dread onslaughts of immoderate spiritual contrition”⁸.

For the monastic life to embrace a celibate life was courageous and hugely demanding given the levels of asceticism even of the moderate who avoided the more bizarre excesses found notably in Syria but also elsewhere. In any case extreme forms of asceticism were not enough: “There are some who destroyed their bodies with penitential exercises but because they lacked discernment they drove themselves far from God”⁹.

⁷ n. 12.

⁸ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Faber and Faber, 1989, p. 214

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 214

The phenomenal feats, by today's standards, of fasting and sleeplessness and unceasing prayer were also integral weapons in the fight against sin in all its forms, including sexual temptation. Moreover, it is clear that for some of the Coptic monks of the fourth and fifth centuries "the immensity of the Egyptian desert dwarfed the facts of sex"¹⁰.

Antony had to wrestle with demons of many kinds including that of fornication, which appears as a beguiling temptress or, alas, in racist form as a black boy who embodied the spirit of fornication. He was fully conscious of the force of temptation: "Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven", and he even added "Without temptations no one can be saved"¹¹. The early monastics were nothing if not realistic about the temptations of the flesh and neither repressed them nor glossed over them but faced them head on.

"Abba Cyrus of Alexandria was asked about the temptation of fornication, and replied, 'If you do not think about it, you have no hope, for if you are not thinking about it, you are doing it. I mean, he who does not fight against the sin and resist it in his spirit will commit the sin physically'"¹².

Temptation in this matter was seen as a way of strengthening the will for the more serious battle against other passions, such as anger.

Dorotheus of Gaza said: "Often in my youth I was violently tempted and I fought with toil against my thoughts...and after I had done that for five years God delivered me of it. God indeed could release you speedily but if that were to happen you would not have gained strength to stand up against other passions"¹³.

For, as Cassian would later affirm, continence is not the same as chastity.

"Abba Gerontios of Petra said that many, tempted by the pleasures of the body, commit fornication, not in their body but in their spirit, and while preserving their bodily virginity, commit prostitution in their soul"¹⁴.

The devil was seen to exploit monks and nuns at their most vulnerable wherever that might be. "Satan does not know by what passion the soul can be overcome. He sows, but without knowing if he will reap, sometimes thoughts of fornication, sometimes thoughts of slander,

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 214

¹¹ B Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Mowbrays, 1975, p.2.

¹² Ibid. p. 101.

¹³ Barsanuphe 258, p. 205 quoted in Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Faber and Faber, 1989, p. 234.

¹⁴ B Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Mowbrays, 1975, p.42.

and similarly for the other passions. He supplies nourishment to the passion which he sees the soul is slipping towards”¹⁵.

Cf. St Benedict’s ‘Shatter evil thoughts on the rock of Christ’ (Prologue 73) and from the *Vita Patrum* 5.10.86: “We shall not be condemned if bad thoughts enter our minds but only if we do bad things with them”.

Sin in all its forms could ruin the soul and sexual sin was not necessarily seen as the foremost of sins.

“Abba Theodore said: ‘If you are temperate, do not judge the fornicator, for you would then transgress the law just as much. And he who said ‘Do not commit fornication’, also said ‘Do not judge’”¹⁶.

Origen saw chastity as a gift which man and God present to each other. ‘If we sacrifice our chastity to (God), then we shall receive from him chastity of Spirit. If we offer our sensuality then we shall receive from his mind as the apostle says, We have the mind of Christ’. Numbers Hom. 24:2.

When we come to the writings of Evagrius of Pontus, we see that despite being condemned for his Origenism, he continued to be held in high regard in monastic circles, especially for his teaching on prayer and temptation. In fact he is now regarded as a central figure in the shaping and consolidation of the monastic movement. He stresses the importance of the need for a spiritual guide and for complete openness: “If you are hard pressed by impure thoughts do not hide them, reveal them at once to your spiritual father and destroy them”; control of thoughts as well as actions is fundamental: “Be a gatekeeper of your heart and let no thought in without questioning it. Examine every single thought one by one and ask it: Are you one of ours or one of our enemies”.

The Lord’s example of freedom for universal friendship showed him able to relate with warm sympathy for all. “Because he clings to me in love I will free him” (Psalm 91:14). With women he was a teacher who, in Dorothy Sayers’ words, “never nagged them nor flattered or coaxed or patronised”.

For Evagrius, sexual abstinence is a preliminary stage in the spiritual life.

“The fear of God strengthens faith and abstinence in turn strengthens the fear of God and perseverance and hope render abstinence unwavering and from these is born ‘apatheia’ of

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 121.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 68-69.

which love is the offspring. Love is the door to natural knowledge which is followed by theology and final blessedness”¹⁷.

“The fear of God is the starting point of the ascetic life which is the Spirit’s method of cleansing the passionate part of the soul”¹⁸.

Apatheia is a Stoic term which was taken up by Christians. It does not mean apathy or lack of emotion but is the result of gentleness and self-control¹⁹.

“A man in chains cannot run nor can the mind that is enslaved to passions, see the place of spiritual prayer. It is dragged along and tossed by these passion-filled thoughts and cannot stand firm and tranquil”²⁰.

There are degrees of *apatheia* – the acquisition of which does not necessarily mean an end to conflict. As we have seen some of the Desert Fathers strongly advised against the avoidance of such struggle, but it should mean that self-control cannot be subverted. The test of *apatheia* is that the mind remains calm before visions that recur during sleep – a theme that will be taken up by Cassian. In this Evagrius prefigures the modern psychological insight that dreams often give tell-tale signs about our psychic health.

For Evagrius there are three parts to the soul: the rational, the concupiscible and the irascible, the latter two of which are regarded as lower and in need of purifying. The concupiscible part is susceptible to passions arising from sexual urges and fantasies and acquisitiveness: “The practical ascetic is the one who has acquired passionlessness in the passionate part of the soul”²¹. The irascible part is the subject of anger, resentment, fears and violence in the human heart. These temptations also have a positive value in leading the monk to the acquisition of virtue.

To reach a state of *apatheia* was but the first stage and was no guarantee of holiness. Experience showed that monks could still fail, even badly, like anyone else. But the flower of the ascetic life should lead to love which is the goal of all striving. “The goal of the ascetic life is charity”²². As in the teaching of St Benedict, seeing Christ in others despite the ‘defilements’ found in sinful human beings was important. The gaze of love must pierce through the defilements and see the God-given dignity beneath. This is not a romantic ideal but must be born of realism. As Evagrius indicated “It is not possible to love all the brethren to the same degree. But is possible to communicate with all in a manner that is

¹⁷ *Praktikos* 60.

¹⁸ *Praktikos* 78 CS 81 36.

¹⁹ For *apatheia* see Mette Sophia Bøcher Rasmussen ‘Like a Rock or Like God? The Concept of *apatheia* in the Monastic Theology of Evagrius of Pontus’, *Studia Theologica* 59 (2005) 147-162.

²⁰ *De Oratione* 71 SC 4161

²¹ *The Gnostikos* 2 SC 356198

²² *Pratikos* 84 SC171:674

above passion and resentment". Jerome, of course, was unconvinced by this and replied with characteristic acerbity: "The soul undisturbed neither by thought nor vice - this means the soul is either a stone or God"²³.

Cassian, a disciple of Evagrius, whom St Benedict mentions specifically as a reliable guide, and who made the eastern experience available to the West, sees chastity as the defining virtue of the perfect monk. We may not share many of his assumptions, but his attempt to put sexual experience in a theological framework challenges us to do the same. So frank was he in his discussion of chastity in his Conferences 12 and 22 and Institute 6 that his Victorian translators, with their instinctive reticence, simply omitted them. We may mock such prudishness in an age where the curiosity about the intimate details of the lives of other people seems insatiable but there is still a place for modesty and reserve in matters of sexuality.

What is shocking in Cassian is his very high expectations and standards. Many of the Church Fathers produced treatises on chastity and a few like Jerome could be almost equally frank, but Cassian, however, explores the subject in depth and with honesty.

The monk "sees nothing in himself in private that he would be embarrassed for others to see nor wants anything detected by the Omnipotent Eye of God to be concealed from human sight" cf. St Benedict's "Every desire of mine is before you" (RB71).

He believed that the highest degree of chastity can be experienced by those to whom God grants it. Those who are still struggling against temptation are continent but not chaste²⁴. The truly chaste person is beyond all physical expression, beyond all erotic thoughts and even beyond sub-conscious desires.

This may seem like an unrealistic ideal and there was for him an element of nostalgia for the angelic life as it was lived in Egypt. But Cassian is down to earth and practical, too. Even perfect chastity is not equated with sinlessness²⁵ and the holy as well as sinners need the grace of God. He discusses spiritual and psychological causes and famously treats at some length the subject of nocturnal illusions in Conference 22 and Institute 6 (cf. the Compline hymn 'Procul recedant somnia et notium phantasmata; hostemque nostrum comprime, Ne pollutantur corpora').

He does not see chastity in isolation but sees it as integral with the other virtues, such as freedom from anger and charity. "The more one grows in sweet patience, the more one grows in purity of body. The further we remove the passion of anger from ourselves, the

²³ LS 256:246

²⁴ Inst. 6:4

²⁵ Conf. 22:6-7

firmer will be our grasp on chastity”²⁶. Lack of chastity can come from gluttony, hence the need for serious fasting, a discipline that continues to be a blind-spot in current western monasticism where it is sometimes argued that the stresses of modern living provides an adequate substitute²⁷ and in contrast to Orthodox monasticism whose spirituality filters through to the laity in what would be considered by western standards rigorous. As well as telling us to love chastity St Benedict also says: ‘Love fasting’.

Cassian’s demonology may also be difficult for those used to scientific and psychological explanations but it is his way of acknowledging that God does not cause evil. The key lies in ‘praxis’ what we do – theory is not enough²⁸ and he asks us not to judge by the opinions of those who do not know it by experience²⁹. One’s own experience, however, is limited and is not enough unless accompanied by a humble compliance with traditional disciplines.

He avoids the use of *apatheia* perhaps because of Jerome’s mockery and because of its pagan associations but instead uses the phrase ‘purity of heart’ to mean something similar. The heart, of course, meant not only the feeling but the mind as well – indeed it could be seen as the conscious centre of our experience as human beings, what we mean by ‘self’. Asceticism prepares the ground for the development of the virtues but is not an end in itself.

Ascetical discipline may be able to achieve a certain amount but only grace can bring true freedom. The basics of the monastic life - fasting, prayer, meditation on the Scriptures and manual labour - are not by themselves enough but they are essential tools. Above all, an undivided heart is needed. But clearly there is more to a pure heart than a strong will. It needs the grace of God and patient endurance. There is much in us which can upset the balance of the heart and most of it is not accessible to will power. Psychology and psychoanalysis have made us even more aware of this. The problems come from deep within us and a realisation of this is the first step of humility. Cassian sees chastity as a gift of grace that can only be experienced existentially and is incapable of intellectual analysis: ‘The gifts which he bestows on the saints for their daily functioning...can only be known by the soul that enjoys them...even intelligence and reflection are incapable of forming an idea of it’³⁰. “Even the healing remedy of Scripture is only effective if the mind is not surfeited with ‘allotria’”³¹.

He offers a six-point programme to assist in living a chaste life that it would take a brave abbot to suggest today: 1. Restrain from useless conversation; 2. Control all angry feelings and earthly cares; 3. Eat no more than two loaves of bread a day; 4. Drink no more water than is necessary; 5. Restrict sleep to 3-4 hours a day; and 6. Recognise that chastity is a

²⁶ Const. 12:6

²⁷ See e.g. Paul Endokimov in *Unité Chrétienne*, November 1970.

²⁸ Conf 18:2-3.

²⁹ Conf. 12:8

³⁰ Conf. 12:12

³¹ Conf. 14:12

gift from God³². Cassian is certainly no semi-Pelagian in this matter, whatever accusations may have been made against him in the controversy over the nature of grace.

“Let the (monk) rejoice in the purity that has been conferred on him. And let him mark well that he has not accomplished this by his own zeal or vigilance but by the protection of God and let him understand that his body can only maintain its perseverance as long as the merciful God grants it the grace to do so”³³. He also recognises the importance of integrating sexual energies into constructive channels. Humiliating temptations can only be overcome through grace: “A man will not be able to master or banish the desire of present things if he does not substitute healthy things for those he wishes to renounce .. if we want to banish carnal concupiscence from our hearts we must replace it immediately with spiritual joy”³⁴ cf. St Paul’s “whatever is true, honourable, just, pure...think on these things”³⁵. All is grace: “Who could not stand in total admiration at a God who has so cooled the fire of his heart which he had come to take for granted as natural and rather unquenchable, so that he is no longer subject to the least erotic excitement of the flesh”³⁶.

A pure heart does not mean the relative innocence of childhood nor the repression that was necessary to get us started so much as the ultimate goal of the integration of sexuality with the rest of life.

The Rule of St Benedict assumes this teaching as its background and context. St Benedict is restrained and full of Roman common sense in what he says on the subject of chaste celibacy, which he takes for granted as a norm for monks.

In his biography, St Gregory the Great tells of the trials of St Benedict including his sexual temptations, perhaps in a rather idealised form that echoes not only the Scriptures but also the experience of St Antony and other early monastic pioneers, though his experience is perhaps more specific.

While in the desert he saw a black bird that symbolised his fluttering thoughts³⁷. The bird was repelled with the sign of the Cross but was followed by further serious temptation. He saw “a woman that the evil spirit brought before the eyes of his soul. Such a fire was enkindled in the spirit of God’s servant at the memory of this beauty that he could no longer

³² Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, Oxford University Press USA, 1998, pp. 75-76.

³³ Conf. 12:5.

³⁴ Conf. 12:5

³⁵ Phil 4:8

³⁶ Conf. 12:7.

³⁷ Cf. *The Life of St Benedict by Gregory the Great II 2:1ff with Commentary by Adalbert de Vogüé*, St Bede’s Publications, Petersham, Massachusetts 1993 pp 21-29. For the appearance of temptation as a ‘black’ boy see also *The Life of St Benedict by St Gregory IV:2*.

contain the flame of love in his heart. He was on the point of deciding to quit the desert, overcome by sensuality”³⁸.

But then he is “suddenly touched by the grace of God from on high”³⁹ and sees some handy bushes of nettles and brambles and plunging himself into them naked solves the problem. “By this exterior burning which was a beneficial chastisement, he extinguished the interior fire which was harmful. He vanquished sin by changing one fire into another”⁴⁰. This proved decisive: “from then on the temptation to sensuality was controlled to such an extent that he never felt it anymore”. Here is the monastic pattern of asceticism and struggle working with the grace of God without which this temptation cannot be overcome.

Gregory explains to his interlocutor Peter that the temptations of the flesh are at their highest intensity when a person is young. After the age of 50, the temperature lowers. Clearly, there are stages in the form the temptation against purity will take at different times in a person’s life and this should lead to growth and development in the perception of what celibacy means for the individual. De Vogüé finds echoes of Christ’s temptations and Passion in Gregory’s narrative as well as of the parable of the sower. “When the temptation had departed, the man of God, like a piece of ground cleared of thorns and well-cultivated, set about producing a harvest of virtues in greater abundance”⁴¹.

There is also a strong parallel in the life of Paul by St Jerome. Paul even bit off his tongue and spat it out at his temptress experiencing thereby, rather unsurprisingly, “a pain which surmounted pleasure”.

Following the Rule of the Master he asks the monk to ‘love chastity’, one of the tools of good works⁴² and, echoing Cassian and Basil, the renunciation of private ownership is extended to the fact that he will not “have dominion even over his own body”⁴³. To the God who gives us his own body in the Eucharist the monk has to be able to say: ‘This is my body which is given for you’.

A lamp is kept prudently burning in the dormitory without any need for explanation but the “pure love of brothers”⁴⁴ is what he expects in his communities. This raises questions about the quality of our community life. When monks do not find their need for affectivity fulfilled there they will almost certainly look for and find it somewhere else. Idleness, too, is seen as an enemy of the soul and hard work is seen as a necessary factor in a celibate life.

³⁸ Ibid. II:2.1.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid. II:2.2.

⁴¹ Ibid. II:2.5.

⁴² RB 4:11

⁴³ RB

⁴⁴ RB 72

The tradition, as we have seen can provide us with valuable insights but the living out of chastity and our growth in it is an existential concern for each of us that cannot be ignored.

Human beings are sexual creatures. Our gender affects the way we relate to others. The first question that was asked at the birth of a child is always: Is it a boy or a girl? A feminine perspective is needed, too, to enhance, complement and even correct a purely male viewpoint.

Today there is an awareness that often in the past emphasis was placed on spiritual and academic formation of those joining monasteries but little help was given in human formation. The products of this system could emerge highly educated in some ways while remaining emotionally extremely immature. Many of the recent scandals have highlighted this. Psychological assessments which are de rigeur now seek to help in assessing whether a candidate for monastic life is capable of living a celibate life. The Lord related to men and women of his day easily and naturally and was capable of strong affective friendships without an intimacy that was either exclusive or possessive. He chose the twelve apostles “to be with him” (Mark 3:14) and women accompanied him wherever he went. Within the Twelve there was a group of three Peter, James and John who are mentioned as being present at particular crucial moments in the Gospel story and one, John, is identified as a particular friend, the “one whom Jesus loved”. In his treatment of the woman who washed his feet and wiped them with her hair and wept, and with Mary Magdalene who wanted to cling to him, we see how Jesus accepts them as they are and gently leads them to a deepening of their attachment at the level of faith and spiritual love.

The God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as a Trinity of relationships does not exist in monadic isolation. As Jack Dominian has written: “The feature that divides the celibate from the married is not the presence or absence of sexual pleasure but the absence of an exclusive one-to-one relationship which is confirmed by the reality and symbolism of sexual intercourse. What the celibate gives up is an exclusive one-to-one relationship and here he is modelling himself on Christ the man for all, hence the importance of his availability, and secondly he is eschatologically anticipating the kingdom in which there is no taking or giving in marriage, but, please note, where relationships of love modelled on the Trinity must exist by definition of all that Christianity stands for”⁴⁵.

We all need affective friendship. The warnings against particular friendship show that prudence is needed and boundaries need to be respected. We should do our best to avoid falling in love and we should also discourage any who seem to be falling in love with us. But it still needs to be said that we need friendship. “God is friendship” St Aelred tells us in his famous treatise on the subject⁴⁶ and we, made in the image and likeness of God,

⁴⁵ Jack Dominian, Formation of a celibate, Address to EBC Abbots, printed in *The Ampleforth Journal* 1975, p.10ff.

⁴⁶ Aelred, De amicitia 1

experience a closeness to God through our experience of human friendship. While we can understand the obvious needs for safeguards one may ask what friendship is not particular – an ‘unparticular’ friendship seems like a contradiction in terms; by definition we find some people more attractive than others as Evagrius also recognised.

St Aelred’s work on spiritual friendship may seem at times sentimental and over-heated emotionally but a fear of where our sexuality might lead us can make people cold and ‘buttoned up’ in a way that is unattractive and even inhuman. This has not always been the case. One thinks of the intense emotional non-sexual friendships in the nineteenth century between people like Newman and Ambrose St John or the relationships between Gerard Manley Hopkins and some of his friends. From a twentieth century perspective alarm bells might start ringing.

Hopkins’ biographer has faced the issue head on: “Inevitably, one asks today whether a commitment to celibacy is not a way of hiding from one self or others a psychological disinclination to marriage that stems from instincts having little to do with religion”⁴⁷. He goes on to point out that in pre-Freudian days to ask whether a person was homosexual would have been almost meaningless, a verbal and psychological anachronism. Not that they were unaware of the dangers but they recognised the complexity of their situation. Hopkins’ friend Stuckey Coles while at school recognised that “a beautiful and ennobling love for his friends might co-exist with much that is faulty and ill-regulated and even with much that is corrupt and, that like all passionate enthusiasms, it has untold capabilities for good but also carries within it the possibility of evil”⁴⁸.

The present desire to label people according to sexual orientation is too simplistic and unhelpful and the reality for most individuals is more complex. The Church rightly says we shall be judged by what we do and think rather than by what we are perceived to be as a result of the acceptance of contemporary ideas on the subject, which may or may not prove to be valid in the long run. A vow that includes celibacy involves a rejection of all genital sexual activity but also requires that purity of heart which involves the whole of our being. Those who are incapable of living this are to be regarded as unsuitable for monastic life. The tradition is very clear about this with good reason and has not been convincingly challenged by contemporary developments in the natural sciences.

Chastity is not meant to make us narrow but rightly undertaken should help us to broaden and mature. As always, there are dangers to be avoided as well as positive benefits to be assimilated. Negatively, as we know from observation in our own communities and even in ourselves and elsewhere, it can lead to a certain coldness and fear of engagement with others at any but a formal or superficial level. It can also manifest itself negatively in

⁴⁷ Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, Harper Collins, 1991, p. 47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 51.

pettiness, in small self-gratifications as compensations, as hypochondria, self-pity, rigidity, resistance to change, and fussiness. To be cold-hearted is to be a contra witness to the values of Christ and His Kingdom. But positively, this “brilliant jewel”, as Pope Paul VI called it⁴⁹, can manifest itself in a personality that is unselfish, outgoing, considerate, generous and engaged in fruitful ministry.

The Lord told us to love one another and that in doing so we were reflecting the most fundamental characteristic of God himself who is love. A celibate life does not mean a life devoid of love. We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19) and so a celibate life is seen as a particular way of responding to that love. “Only the love of God calls in a decisive way to religious chastity”⁵⁰ and that will often seem like folly to outsiders and be met with incomprehension or even ridicule. ‘When I love him, then I am chaste’.

An important element in celibacy is not renunciation but attachment to God. All other goods are relative compared with this. Renunciation is not a means of finding God but its consequence – anything other than union with God becomes less compelling.

Above all it is a gift of grace – self-control is a gift of the Spirit – but that does not make it any less costly ‘always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies’ (2 Cor. 4:10).

As Pope Benedict has pointed out in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* love is no longer a mere ‘command’, it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near us⁵¹. Man is truly himself when his body and soul are truly united. He is a psychosomatic unity according to the Hebrew anthropology inherited by Christianity from Judaism. He expresses and communicates himself through a body and any form of Gnostic dualism is unacceptable. The body is intrinsically good, a temple of the Holy Spirit but it stands in need of purification and redemption. The resurrection life is not a rejection of the material – how could it be in a religion of Incarnation? – and the resurrection of the body is what we are promised by the Gospel. Following Origen and later tradition the Pope criticises those who see ‘eros’ in a way that reduces sex to a commodity. Properly understood, refined and purified, it needs to be, *pace* Anders Nygren⁵² integrated into ‘agape’.

By putting ourselves outside the struggle for money, power and bodily gratification we follow Jesus along the way of sacrifice and suffering, the way of the Cross, with the joy that is set before us in awaiting our transfiguration, the redemption of our bodies when we come to experience the ‘bios angelicos’ in its fullness.

⁴⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 1967, n.1.

⁵⁰ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 1971, n. 13

⁵¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*

⁵² Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*.

There is not only pain but also joy in a celibate life freely offered to God and, as TS Eliot reminds us such joyful moments:

.....are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation⁵³

Ultimately, in any expression of love, which is what the call to celibacy essentially is, there has to be a commitment that goes beyond reason. We can give reasons but our vocation is a gift and mystery to be explored and involves our whole being, of which the rational is but a part. It is not inhuman, otherwise it would be immoral to choose it. It needs psychological and emotional maturity but it goes beyond the realm of science to the mystery of Christ that can only ultimately be accepted in faith.

We need a strong prayer life and a love of monastic life to protect us from the obvious dangers and that will provide us with the context within which to work out how to consecrate our celibacy to God and to discover its secret and its value. And gradually we discover the truth that to lose our life is to find it and in doing so we are led to the One who alone can satisfy all our desires and deepest longings.

⁵³ T.S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages V, The Four Quartets* (London, Faber and Faber, 1944), quoted in Ben Kimmerling, 'Celibacy and Intimacy', *The Way Supplement* 1993/77, 87-96.