

# Celibacy and Sexuality - Living Fully and Loving Deeply

## Introductory Comments

The Bishops attending the Synod on the Priesthood in Rome in October 1990 reaffirmed the current tradition of the Latin Church that, with a few very limited exceptions, only those men who are prepared to undertake a celibate lifestyle would be ordained to the priesthood.

The relevant canons in the Code of Canon Law are the following:

**Canon 1037.** *A candidate ... for the priesthood is not to be admitted to the order of diaconate unless he has, in the prescribed rite, publicly before God and the Church undertaken the obligation of celibacy.*

**Canon 277 #1** *Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven, and are therefore bound to celibacy. Celibacy is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can more easily remain close to Christ with an undivided heart, and can dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and of neighbour.*

Canon 277 makes the point that celibacy can help us to love Christ and to dedicate ourselves to a life of service. The outcome is not automatic. Celibacy can also be quite neutral or even get in the way of our growing in love of Christ and life-giving service to others. If it is to enhance life, we need to work hard at it.

In this article I do not wish to discuss the wisdom or otherwise of the Church's practice. Whatever we feel about it, whether we feel that the decision corresponds with our own experience of priesthood, or whether we feel mystified, hurt and angry, the practice has been strongly reaffirmed.

Nor do I intend to open up the question of the reasons why any one particular priest chooses to accept celibacy, though I realize that the more willingly we embrace a decision, the more we are likely to commit ourselves to it.

For the sake of this presentation I wish to work within the present real situation to explore not so much the "why" of celibacy as the "how" to live it as richly as possible.

In my own case I think that my acceptance of celibacy is tied closely to my personal experience of my relationship with Jesus. I wonder whether my attitude is similar to the experience of a man who has married and who chooses not to relate sexually with other women. I mentioned this once to a friend, who promptly labelled it with an epithet that means the same as nonsense. I do think it is a mystery. In saying this I do not wish to avoid the issue; we don't grow by avoiding issues. Being celibate seems to have become virtually connatural to me by now and, while not without its difficulties, does not loom too large as a source of consistent frustration. The energy is not around the issue of "yes" or "no", but how to live it in a way that is life-giving for myself and, I hope, for others.

The same friend also questioned my freedom, on the basis that I had never experienced the alternative. That may be a purely philosophical question. However, while I realize that my freedom is affected to some extent by inner fears, phobias, compulsions and habits, as well as by external considerations such as the difficulty of finding alternative means of income, I still believe that I have sufficient freedom to make of the decision one that allows me scope to live life richly.

As I see it, the task is ever before me - to grow humanly and spiritually within the celibate life style, to maintain an appropriate level of personal happiness and joy, and especially to grow in the capacity to fulfil what Jesus nominated as (i) the greatest commandment of the Old Law: to love God with heart, soul and mind, to love ourselves, and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matt. 22,37); and (ii) his own "last will and testament" which he left to us at his Last Supper: to love one another as I have loved you (John 15,12).

All Christians are invited to live chastely. The priest is invited to live chastely within a celibate life-style. A choice for celibacy is a choice to love and express that love, but not genitally nor in a relationship that would exclude others. Celibacy makes no sense other than in the broader context of a firm choice to grow into an ever more loving person.

*"The priest wishes to be brother to everyone and spouse to no one. For the possibility of this type of existence, a community is essential. In and through community, celibacy comes alive as a beautiful, wide open, vulnerable style of loving many people. The sign that one has the charism of celibacy is precisely this: the celibate is able to love more genuinely, more profoundly and joyfully by having the freedom of the celibate state."*

*National Conference of Catholic Bishops (USA),  
**Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood,**  
Washington, 1973. p.37.*

In this article I would like to share some of the insights I have gained during the course of my life. I have read a variety of books that have treated different aspects relevant to the question; I have listened to audiotapes; I have attended the occasional seminar where the issue has been raised; I have been privileged to be party to the reflections of others. What I have heard and read I have tried to monitor against the background of my own personal experience. I see myself as not in any way an expert, but as a thoughtful pilgrim.

I realize that some priests have a homosexual orientation. In terms of a life of celibacy, and of chastity within the celibate lifestyle, I would expect that the problems of men with heterosexual or homosexual orientations would be basically similar. We are all called to chastity; we are all called to friendship; we are all called to live life to the full. However, a homosexual priest who reads this article may need to make on occasion a few appropriate adjustments.

A final introductory point: I am reflecting with men in mind. I am not as conversant with the experience of women. I think we sometimes do not share the same spontaneous or conditioned reactions, at least to the same extent. And I expect

that, if I were writing for women, I would need to express some things differently. Specifically I am thinking of diocesan priests, for whom celibacy is not always a direct choice but still accepted freely as a condition for priesthood. I think that the fact that it may have been undertaken not for itself but as a condition for priesthood may affect, at least for some, the way it is experienced.

## Part One - Living Life Fully and Chastely

Being sexual is part of being human. Our sexuality is embodied physically; it also affects how we automatically feel and experience life; it affects our ways of thinking, our praying, our living out our choice to love.

We live out our lifelong task of growing, like Jesus, in wisdom, age and grace, as sexual persons; and at each stage of our lives we need to be aware of our sexuality and its requirements and respond appropriately to them. We choose not to express our sexuality in a genital way. This does not mean that we can rescind from our sexuality in any of its other aspects.

Coming to terms with our sexuality and learning how to relate to it and draw on its energies in a healthy, life-enhancing way is a lifelong process. For myself, and I believe for most of us, it also involves a degree of remedial work and catching-up with so far unlived life-stages.

**Our sexuality is an energy source, a very powerful one indeed. If it is directed properly, it is an invaluable resource. If directed and handled inappropriately, it can cause a lot of confusion and personal damage to ourselves and others.**

As an energy source it comes under the generic category of desire, a drive to have, to find pleasure, and is directed ultimately towards fulfilment in genital expression, especially in relationship with another.

Because it is a strong energy source, it happens often enough that we can be almost instinctively fearful of it. Sometimes it is referred to as the "Mysterium fascinans et tremendum" - a "Mystery that fascinates and frightens". How much this fear is instinctive and how much it is conditioned by upbringing is an academic point. Certainly our family experiences and cultural setting can contribute enormously to this fear.

In my own case some pretty harmless early childhood experiences broke into my childhood state of innocence, and in the confusion of my four-year-old mind gave me the impression that my sexuality would occasion the censure of my mother and could even deprive me of her love. Indeed, as I grew a little older, I somehow feared that my sexuality could deprive me of the love of God and bring about my eternal rejection in hell. Consequently, for a major part of my life, I subconsciously regarded my penis as "taboo"; I experienced difficulty in talking about it, and felt awkward even to say the word. Without my being aware of the fact, I was frightened of it - it was dangerous. At the same time my fears had the same effect on my attitude to the female body with its sexual organs. The fears did not take away the fascination. If anything, they deepened it, but also drove it from my conscious awareness. I could not own the fascination.

When I was a child, sexual images and desires in my mind were called "impure" thoughts and desires, and were even labelled as being mortally sinful if consented to. I learnt that it was important to spare no pains to make the images and desires go away. Over the years I became fairly successful in this work of suppression. I

realize now how much confusion there was there and how much damage was done by the advice I was given.

**The truth is that our sexuality is God's gift to us. God planned that we be sexual. God designed our bodies and called them good. God gave us human life, and one expression of that life is our sexual energy.**

God chose that our sexual energy be expressed in desires, drives and images. If they are "impure", then our designing God is "impure". Our sexual energies, and the images and drives in which they present themselves in our consciousness, are morally neutral. Morality becomes an issue only when the will is brought to bear and we choose. If we choose to act inappropriately, then we can sin.

In fact our sexual desires and images are quite indiscriminate, and can be directed to people real or imaginary with whom it could be quite inappropriate to act sexually. But it would be the action and the choice that would be wrong, not the spontaneous image or desire. The existence and the nature of the desires or images say nothing about our moral goodness or badness; they simply indicate we are alive and responsive!

## **Damaging Reactions**

Repressed and suppressed emotional attitudes embedded in childhood are likely to go deep into the unconscious. They remain largely unnoticed, but do not dissolve. They are hard to bring to conscious notice, and even when they are recognized, they are hard to change. Their being unnoticed takes away none of their energy component, but has the effect of the energy being expressed in often most inappropriate ways.

Repression occurs when our sexual drives are *spontaneously* prevented from entering our consciousness by blocking measures induced by our fears and resulting from messages learnt mostly in childhood about their badness. We are not consciously aware of this process. There is little we can do directly about repression precisely because we are not conscious of it. We can only reverse it in the long term as we begin to recognize our fears and learn to cope with them.

Suppression occurs when we *deliberately* try to push out of our awareness and to make disappear the sexual drives and images of which we are conscious. We try to make the feelings go away.

Both are, however, unnecessary responses often based on misunderstandings about morality etc.. Unfortunately, they are ultimately harmful responses.

*Repression or suppression of sexuality:*

- a) consumes energy unnecessarily*
- b) wastes a valuable energy source*
- c) cripples other associated capacities*
- d) causes emotional problems*
- e) leads to destructive explosions*
- f) distorts genuine religious attitudes*

It would appear that the effort to repress or suppress the energy involved in sexual drives requires an equivalent amount of energy, usually drawn from our fears. The result is that we consume energy unnecessarily. This can have the obvious effect of tiring us, emotionally as well as physically.

It also means that the energy tied to the sexual drives cannot be directed to other useful pursuits. Sexual energy need not be directed solely to sexual or genital activity. It is available; and without our consciously identifying it, we can automatically draw on it for other acceptable enterprises. It is a particularly helpful energy source for our pastoral projects and friendships. (The way that one kind of psychological energy can be transformed into another may be a little like the way that heat energy derived from burning fuel can be transformed into motive energy and harnessed to propel a car.)

There is also usually a fair amount of overkill in our indiscriminate repression or suppression of sexual energy. Our fears can lead us away not simply from sexual and genital activity but can reduce or kill the capacity for passionate involvement with anyone or anything. We can lose our capacity for deep friendship. We can lose our capacity for passionate involvement in the pursuit of justice, or commitment to a life-giving presence and service to others. Personally I get so frustrated with myself, and so disillusioned with many in the Church, that we spend so much energy reacting against sexual aberrations yet barely raise a whimper as so many people in our world struggle under the obscenities of rampant injustice and military violence.

As already noted, a dangerous consequence of repression or suppression is that the unwanted energy does not simply go away. It goes underground and is transformed into other things of which we are not aware and which we do not deliberately direct ourselves. These can often be quite unhealthy, especially if transformed into other emotional or psychosomatic problems. Because the process occurs at a level below consciousness, the causes of such emotional or psychosomatic problems cannot be directly diagnosed, and problems that present at conscious level as one thing (e.g. emotional tension, depression, burn-out, physical disorders) can sometimes be the expression of repressed or suppressed sexuality.

Repression and suppression could be instances where the comment of Jesus is relevant (Luke 11.24-26) :

*"When an unclean spirit goes out of someone it wanders through waterless country looking for a place to rest, and not finding one it says, "I will go back to the home I came from". But on arrival, finding it swept and tidied, it then goes off and brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and set up house there, and so that person ends up worse off than before".*

A further consequence of repression or suppression can be explosion. If the energy necessary to counteract the sexual energy begins to dry up through tiredness or any other cause, then the bottled up sexual energy may explode in masturbation or in other inappropriate and unexpected ways. We do precisely what we feared. The fascination temporarily holds sway; but once release of the energy has happened, then feelings of guilt and remorse take over, fear returns, and the sexual energy is suppressed again. Desire and fear constantly wrestle each other, and whichever one is in control at the time determines behaviour. But there is no personal growth, no deepening of self- acceptance, no acquiring of control, just an ever-recurring pattern of repression and explosion.

It is interesting to note that some psychologists would also maintain that repressed or suppressed sexuality often expresses itself in second-rate religiosity, the kind of religion that is compulsive, oppressive and harsh on the one hand, or overly-sweet and leaning towards devotions rather than genuine encounter with God in real intimacy on the other. (They also maintain that the reverse is true: that a repression of genuine spirituality often expresses itself in second-rate sexuality - as so many current cultural trends would seem to confirm.)

*"The law of the preservation of energy applies also to the psyche. Whatever is repressed, while then lost to consciousness, still does not disappear. It becomes an unconscious compulsive force which then has primitive and potentially destructive characteristics. Repression of sexuality leads to hysterical, exaggerated pseudo spirituality, typical of Victorianism and of Freud's days. But repression of the religious myth leads to the neurosis of our time, to a primitive mythologization of secular values, to a pseudo religion of material prosperity, monetary greed and sexual thrills".*

*Edward C. Whitmont, **The Symbolic Quest**,  
Princeton Paperback, New Jersey, 1978, p.102*

## **Reverse Process**

What further complicates the issue is that other repressed feelings or unrecognized problems (deep hurts and angers, for example, or a sense of abandonment or loneliness) can sometimes express themselves in sexual drives or images. Sometimes these feelings and problems may be fresh ones, triggered off by recent experiences of conflict or loneliness. Or they may be long-forgotten ones still stored in the unconscious memory. Perhaps not surprisingly these repressed but untended hurts and angers may seek compensation and substituted consolation through potentially pleasurable sexual avenues. But in their origin they are not sexual problems, and to treat them as sexual problems will achieve little. It is the original hurt, anger, alienation or whatever that needs to be treated. This is difficult precisely because the problem has been repressed and transformed deep in the unconscious and is no longer consciously recognized. For a solution to be found at the presenting sexual level, the deeper problem needs to be diagnosed and dealt with. This will probably require professional help. Until this happens, a person can believe himself and his persistent sexual drives

and fantasies to be quite abnormal, with real problems for his self-esteem and peace of mind. What is more, the deeper needs remain unmet and true balance and peace evades him.

## **Life-giving Responses**

Since repression and suppression are such inappropriate and indeed dangerous responses to our sexual drives, what are we as celibates to do, since we have deliberately chosen a path that does not allow for their direct expression in sexual behaviour?

### ***Some Life-giving Responses to Sexual Drives***

1. *Uncovering Repression*
2. *Stopping Suppression*
  - a) *by awareness (self-knowledge)*
  - b) *by removing the fears*
    - *proper theology*
    - *facing childhood influences*
    - *operative concept of God*
  - c) *by forming a mature conscience*
3. *Owning Sexuality*
  - a) *from fantasy to reality*
  - b) *through active imagination*
4. *Uncovering the Deeper Needs for Affirmation*
5. *On-the Spot Measures*
  - a) *distraction*
  - b) *diverting the energy*
  - c) *remaining neutral*
  - d) *forgiveness*
6. *Owning the Pain and Anger*
7. *Self-Discipline*
8. *Prayer*

Repression is difficult to deal with, since it is an unnoticed spontaneous mechanism learnt from childhood. Perhaps our observation of our behaviour in other areas (e.g. tension, depression, etc.) leads us to suspect that it may be happening, but we cannot notice it consciously. It is an unconscious reaction of ours. If we suspect it is operating and interfering with our human growth, it may be worth our consulting a counsellor.

Suppression is another matter. That is a more deliberate and conscious reaction. To stop suppressing we need to become aware of our fears of sexuality and deal



with them. We cannot necessarily eliminate our fears, but we can begin by noticing them and giving them permission to be there. The ancient christian tradition has constantly reiterated that self- knowledge is the beginning of all movement towards wholeness.

Our fears of our sexuality probably come from a whole variety of sources. One already mentioned is a faulty theology which maintains that sexual drives and images are morally wrong, seriously so, and meriting the punishment of hell. It may be easy enough to deal with that theology simply by recognizing that it is wrong. But unfortunately there is usually more to it than that.

**It is easy to give notional assent to a shift of ground. It is another thing to feel easy about it after a lifetime of reacting otherwise. We need to be patient with ourselves and our fears, and learn to live with them and not be browbeaten, as it were, by them.**

Similar to the faulty theology are the cultural, sub-cultural or even family norms that we have grown up with and that have become part of us. We automatically assume they are right simply because they have always been part of our awareness. They can exercise a considerable power over us and our comfort with our judgments about right and wrong. They need to be examined and assessed for what they are, and consciously contradicted when necessary.

Particularly important in my own life was the childhood experience noted earlier. I internalized what I took to be my mother's attitude. My perception was quite distorted, and its effect was that I believed that any kind of sexual experience would cause the withdrawal of her love. In the unconscious process of internalization I quite mistakenly created an in-dwelling critic, a veritable witch within myself, and gave her enormous power. From then on, sexuality triggered a very deep fear of rejection. In my own case that fear was later transferred also towards God: I felt myself even potentially damned if I misbehaved sexually.

Despite all my conscious attitudes, that fear persists into the present, and can still be powerful. I wonder sometimes if my fear of sexuality and the distaste that part of me felt for it made the choice of a celibate lifestyle in late adolescence virtually a non-issue. Certainly it was not until years later that I even questioned in any way the value and necessity of celibacy in my life.

It has become increasingly important to face the fear of my "internalized mother" and to discover a space where I can relate to my sexuality from other than a context of fear. At the same time it has become important also to face my operative understanding of God. I think that all of us carry a number of "images" of God within us, formed over the years, the deepest and most influential ones coming from childhood. Those childhood images are also the least accurate. But they persist, and tend to be felt most strongly in times of stress. As a priest I have a concept of God that does not tally with the fear reactions I can easily feel. But, as the respected catholic psychologist, Conrad Baars, once said of a priest in a similar context, the God of the priest was not the God of the man. Newman would have spoken about the difference between notional assent and real assent.

**Until we cut ourselves free from the influence of our "internalized mother" and from the God who looks to raw actions and not to the heart, we almost inevitably will find ourselves suppressing our sexual drives. Fear runs rampant.**

## **Forming a mature Conscience**

The task of breaking free is simply part of the broader task of development of conscience. An essential element in conscience formation is our breaking loose from our superego, or our accumulated assumptions about right and wrong.

A classic instance of superego influence shows up in such questions as: How far can I go? Was what I did a sin? Superego focuses on isolated actions. A developed conscience takes into account what is/was done, but asks the more personal question: what does it mean? It refuses to look at actions out of context but sees them as signs of inner meaning, as the external expression or rejection of deeper values.

Human and spiritual maturity involves our searching for, recognizing and accepting what is really of value. It is an intellectual, appreciative, almost aesthetic, exercise. We need to know what we have really come to believe from greater insight into ourselves and from a more acute self-knowledge, and to distinguish that from what we have simply picked up from others. It may be easy enough to be familiar with the principles, and even to understand the natural law reasoning on which they are based. It is another thing to ascertain whether we are really convinced by the reasoning, and even more importantly, have come honestly to appreciate the values which the principles aim to protect.

We need to work from our own consciences, not somebody else's conscience, and particularly not somebody else's superego, parental injunctions real or imagined, or the broader cultural assumptions, taboos, and so on. However, as Christians we realize that in forming our consciences we best touch into the presence of Christ and the guidance of his Spirit when our search is done together, not when we journey alone and in isolation. We discern truth and value most securely within genuine Christian community (or at least in dialogue with a soul-friend), enlightened by the Gospel and the wisdom of the Church.

When writing of the natural law, St Thomas observes that conclusions about specific matters are not obviously conclusive to everyone, even in good faith, and that what is clear and conclusive to one does not necessarily appear clear and conclusive to another.

*"When it is a question of universal first principles, the natural law is the same for everyone both in so far as what is in fact right and in so far as this is recognized by everyone.*

*However, in regard to some specific principles, which are as it were conclusions drawn from the common principles, in the majority of cases natural law is still consistent*

*both in so far as what is in fact right  
and in so far as this is recognized as such;*

*but in some cases this may not be so  
both in regard to what is in fact right  
(because of certain factors that complicate issues)...,  
and also in regard to how clearly this is recognized  
(because for some people their reason is adversely affected  
either by passion, or by custom, or by bad natural habits)."*

*St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I-II, q.94, a.4.*

At one stage in my own journey when the experience of the sexual drives was particularly strong, the conflict between what I wanted to do and what I believed were the requirements of a genuine commitment to chastity created quite an agony. It was very much a conflict of desire and fear. I desired to do what I feared to do. I was uncertain about what I really believed. Was what I desired to do really wrong? The way I tried to resolve my struggle was to read how other authors rated the right and wrong of what I desired. I wanted someone else to tell me; I hoped that someone with a degree of authority would give me permission to do what my superego (and also possibly my conscience) certainly condemned. In retrospect I see that this was an effort on my part to sidestep the difficult task of seeking what I truly believed myself, to develop and to listen to my own conscience, and to take personal responsibility for my own decisions. The crisis was solved at the time by the fact that the fears were eventually stronger than the desires. In essence, that solution meant a suppression of the desires. It did not lead to growth, and merely postponed the struggle.

The work of formation of conscience takes account of the accumulated wisdom of the Church; but eventually God looks to our own hearts. What do we really believe? What do we really appreciate? If we act on the answers to these questions, we can sometimes feel quite lonely. Yet my adult concept of God is that God wishes me to choose freely on the basis of what I truly value rather than compulsively from fear.

*"You have heard how it was said, You shall not commit adultery. But I say this to you, if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5.28).*

Jesus' comment is situated among a number of other comments making the point that morality is more a question of the heart than of external behaviour. It engages us at the level of our inner values. Intentions are as significant as actions. The decision in question, "to look at lustfully" , is the end of a process of dialogue between the desire that spontaneously erupts, the fears and habits of years, and the real self's sense of value and integrity; and the response that Jesus condemns is the deliberate choice to compromise integrity for the sake of the desired pleasure.

The trouble with certain personalities, particularly those with a scrupulous or perfectionist streak, is that to admit to specific weakness and specific guilt can be difficult and almost impossible for them. Scrupulous persons, for example, can accuse themselves of guilt in general but cannot admit specific guilt. (For example, they can recite general formulas to cover every conceivable sin they may have done, and for which God might see them guilty (!), but they cannot answer the question: Do you honestly believe that this specific thing you did was a sin?) Their perception of themselves is shame based, and this is utterly frightening for them. Their way of coping with this deep sense of shame is to be perfect. If they are not perfect, they are nothing. They cannot afford to admit to any imperfection. Within the Christian sub-culture, this scrupulosity frequently manifests in the area of sexuality.

Growth and peace can come gradually as they let go of their unreal shame and learn to love and accept themselves as God loves and accepts them. They can learn to free themselves from their fears of vulnerability and imperfection. and to recognize that they do have sexual drives that are indiscriminate, earthy and demanding. They are not captive of these drives. But to avoid accepting specific guilt by pretending that their sexual drives do not exist, or by rationalizing them by some subterfuge or other, is destructive of their true freedom and human growth. In the meantime, while they wait for their faith in God's love to become stronger in them, and for their sense of shame to drop back to realistic proportions, they can for a start accept their panic at the thought of guilt and their inability to admit it. They can begin to grow from there.

Given that we are in the process of forming our consciences to the best of our ability, what else do we do in the face of our sexual drives? If suppressing them is not helpful, what other alternatives do we have?

## **Diverting the Energy**

We can own the sexual drives and the images in which they express themselves. We can choose not to act on them or deliberately to entertain ourselves with them, in the light of our commitment to chastity, but we do not have to try to force the drives and images to disappear. In fact, the less we fear them, the less they disturb. A panic reaction has the very real effect of making the drives and images persist.

However, while free-floating fantasy may not be morally wrong if we are not directly responsible for it, it also gets us nowhere. It can be a classic example of poor time-competence: a revisiting of the past from which we integrate nothing or a wishful thinking about the future that leads us nowhere. To continue in a hazy, lazy semi-dream-state may be entertaining but is pure unreality and a kind of self-deception. We cannot really live in either the past or the future, only in the present. It makes sense to take hold of the free-floating fantasy and bring ourselves into the present where we either learn from the past or plan for the future. Are we prepared to plan to do what we are fantasising? If yes, then let us drag ourselves out of our dreaming and plan, and carry the moral responsibility for it. If no, then let us own

and draw on our motivation and bring into play our other values and beliefs (or admit our fears), be honest with ourselves, and surrender our dreams of some unreal sexual paradise.

## **Active Imagination**

What can be even more helpful is to use the energy and the images fruitfully. One way is to draw on our imagination actively and to dialogue, as it were, with the drive or the image, to let it express itself in words so that it ceases to be vague and unowned and becomes instead recognized and owned.

**We accept that one aspect of our personality is truly sexual, and even potentially irresponsible. It is important to recognize and to own this aspect of our self, to bring it into the open and out of the penumbra of shadow and half-light. The more we can bring it from our unconscious or sub-conscious into full awareness, the less does it behave disruptively within the personality. Self-knowledge is the basis for all integration and growth in holiness.**

I have found that for most of my life I gave a kind of notional assent to the fact of my sexual fascinations, but had not really owned them and recognized them as parts of my personality. Owning them does not mean giving them permission to determine my behaviour. But until I know myself, I cannot love myself, especially those aspects of myself which I may find difficult to love. Nor can God's love touch there creatively.

The fact is that, while my sexual drives are very real, they are not the only drives that I experience within myself. One reason why my sexuality tends to remain in the half-light is the existence still of the other voices within me condemning it, and condemning me for having such drives. Another factor is the very real fear I have of running foul of these voices. Besides these psychological factors is the realm of my own spirit, the realm of my real values, priorities and hopes. This is the realm of my conscience in its deepest sense.

To respond appropriately to life, I need to give scope to all these various voices, drives and values. I need to hear them so that their influence is brought into the open, and a balanced response can be made. Active imagination is a very effective way of doing this. It is a skill that is easily learnt.

## **An Explanation of Active Imagination**

*"... the simplest place to start (active imagination) is with the daily running dialogue that goes on within the minds of most of us. We spend a lot of time "arguing" with ourselves. A little introspection will reveal that there are all kinds of voices battling inside of us. Often these inner dialogues resemble courtroom scenes, and it is as if we were on trial for something. There is the inner prosecutor, the critical voice that tries to convict us of this or that, and that also, as a rule, constitutes itself as judge as well as accuser... These "voices" are like autonomous thoughts or moods that suddenly inject themselves into our consciousness. If we are totally unaware of them, we become identical with them... To become aware of the autonomous nature of these voices is to begin to make a distinction between them and us, and this dawning awareness brings the possibility of breaking free from what amounts at a state of being possessed.*

*"To begin an active imagination with the argument we are hearing inside of us we start by writing down the thoughts already racing through our minds... By writing things down we really begin to hear what is being said, and are now in a position to examine these utterances for what they are...*

*"Writing things down also strengthens the ego, for to take pen in hand and begin to write is an ego activity, and has the effect of solidifying and centering consciousness, and affirming it in the face of destructive influences. Hence it now becomes possible to find our position and, perhaps, turn the tables on an inner enemy who, up until now, has had the advantage of being able to work in the dark...*

*"Writing gives reality to (active imagination); unless it is written it may seem wispy and vaporish and lack impact. Writing things down also keeps us from cheating on the process. It may be that there are some unpleasant things we have to learn about ourselves and it is easy to avoid these unless they are written.*

*"Active imagination itself is hard work; it takes discipline, and to do it we must overcome the inertia that grips us when it comes to psychological matters. People are lazy about their own psyches....*

*"In the dialogue form of active imagination it often works best to write down the first thoughts that come into our minds. We identify the voice with whom we wish to speak and say what we want, and then record the first "answering thought" that occurs to us. Then we answer back, and so the dialogue proceeds."*

*John Sandford, **The Invisible Partners**,  
Marshall Pickering, Basingstoke, 1988, pp.120-125.*

### **An Instance of Active Imagination in the Gospels:**

*"A very good example of active imagination is found in Matthew's Gospel in the story of the Temptations in the Wilderness. Jesus had gone into the wilderness to be alone after receiving the Holy Spirit from God and hearing the voice that proclaimed "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased". Naturally, the first thing that would happen after such an experience is an inflation, a temptation to take the experience in the wrong way, and this temptation is presented in the voice of Satan, who says, "If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread". Jesus hears that voice within himself and answers it. The voice then speaks a second time, and a third, and each time Jesus hears the voice and replies to it. This is active imagination. Nor is this a way of saying that the Satan in the story is not real. Such a voice within us is very real, so real that unless we hear it, recognize it for what it is, and respond to it, we will likely be taken over by it."*

*John Sandford, The Invisible Partners, p. 127-128.*

### **Using Active Imagination as a Means of Self-Knowledge**

*Voice 1: She's beautiful.. so attractive. I would love to touch her .  
(Further specific details not appropriate to indicate here.)*

*Voice 2: You should be ashamed of yourself, thinking like that. After the up-bringing you have had and all you have learnt. What sort of priest are you?*

*Voice 1: It doesn't matter all that much. It's not all that wrong. I can't help just being fascinated by her. I want her. No one else gets too worried by it.*

*Voice 2: Yes, go ahead, and just be no better than every other sex-crazed man around! You're better than them. How can you preach to others, if you are no different from them yourself?*

*Voice 1: No one would know. I mightn't go the whole way, unless she drew me on...*

*Voice 2: You know it would be a sin. Would you risk your own integrity, your own soul, just for a short time with that degraded woman? Wake up to yourself, pull yourself together, get control of yourself.*

*Voice 3: I feel frightened. I don't want to risk going to hell. I don't want to hurt God. What if I should die before I changed my mind!*

*Voice 1: Ah, shut up. It wouldn't matter all that much just once. I could go to Confession again soon.*

*Voice 2: Don't! It's so disgusting! You should be ashamed of yourself.*

*Voice 4: Yes, I would like to. I accept the fact of the strong desire. I recognize my fear but know that fear is not a sufficient reason not to restrain myself, and I have no intention to accept an attitude of self-condemnation. But it is not what I am really on about. It's hard, but that's OK.*

## **Developing the Undeveloped**

Another way of constructively using our sexual fantasies is to allow them to reveal our even deeper needs so that we then choose to respond to those needs.

I am not sure of the psychological development of the homosexual person, but for the heterosexual person there seems to be a rhythm in our sexual energies. At certain times of our lives they seem to be stronger and more insistent than at others. They are strong when we are young and the blood is red, but they also stir again around mid-life, perhaps precisely at the time when we think they are beginning to behave themselves. Their resurgence at this stage can be quite puzzling, and lead us to question what is really going on in ourselves, whether we will ever have peace, or even whether we made the best choice in choosing celibacy.

One reason for this resurgence of sexual energy lies in the way we were made. God made us for wholeness, and wholeness leads to the development of whole sets of human potentials, some of which at first sight seem to be mutually exclusive. At different stages of our lives our pressing task is to develop one or other of these sets of potentials, with the result that its apparent contrary is neglected. In the earlier stages of a man's life, we are drawn to develop those potentials that equip us to live appropriately within our culture, to compete in a difficult world, to achieve our goals. Our culture encourages us to develop our capacity to be strong and to master our environment, to reason things out, to judge and to expect performance, to strive and to be competitive, to take and to give the occasional knock. As we are caught up in developing these potentials, we leave another set of potentials dormant. Among these potentials are the capacities to be gentle, non-condemning, accepting, vulnerable, sensitive. The God who calls us to life and its fullness has put into our nature an inbuilt urge to wholeness and to balance. Around the middle stage of our life, the earlier strongly masculine ideals seem to be less attractive and we feel the stirrings of the undeveloped potentials. We are attracted to these other potentials, especially as we see them embodied in others. They are what our culture would identify as feminine qualities, and we find their presence in women to be highly attractive.

We are likely to find our imagination embodying these qualities in highly sexual imagery. The presence of these fantasies can be an indication that we do indeed need to be treated gently, to be accepted as we are in all our weakness and vulnerability and not to be harshly condemned or, for me at least, insistently urged to strive relentlessly to be ever better. They can indicate that our own pressures



on ourselves to perform and to achieve need to be balanced (because indeed the more insistent calls to perform and compete come from within ourselves, rather than from without).

**What we need, more even than the gentleness of a woman, is a gentleness, sensitivity, acceptance etc. from within ourselves. We need to allow the feminine qualities dormant within us to awaken, not to replace our masculine qualities, but to balance them and to bring ourselves to wholeness.**

Our deeper need is not that the women of our fantasies pamper to our needs for warmth and closeness and affirmation and gentleness, but that we give that to ourselves; that we bring balance into our expectations of ourselves, that we allow space for vulnerability, even for failure, that we learn to forgive ourselves and generally learn to be nurturing and warm towards ourselves. Until these needs begin to be met reasonably adequately, our sexual fantasies will continue.

It is also worth mentioning that the needs for gentleness, sensitivity, etc. can also be beautifully met by women friends, but even the response of friends cannot take away the deeper necessity that we ourselves relate to our own selves with balance. Others can help us but cannot do it for us.

## **Short-term Measures**

These responses to our sexual drives are long-term responses. What do we do in the short-term when the drives seem to build up to explosion point? I think the answer to that is not different from what is needed when any feeling builds up to breaking point. We do what we can; we distract ourselves if we can; we drain off the energy by doing something energetic like exercise or something of the sort; we can try talking to it. But there is nothing gained by trying directly to make the feelings go away by suppression. If the images and feelings persist, they are morally neutral. We can let them stay there, and try to hold our will in neutral. We can't help the enjoyment, but it is morally neutral unless we deliberately and freely choose to take over. The less we panic, the less likely they are to persist. If we lose control, then any moral assessment is to be made on the traditional recognition that sin requires freedom. And even if we choose with sufficient freedom to go along with the drives and express them inappropriately, sin need never be the ultimate. We can accept our weakness, make peace with ourselves, recognize that we can love even an imperfect self, and begin to forgive. There is no doubt about the attitude that God adopts.

*"We need to fall, and we need to realize this. If we never fell we should never know how weak and wretched we are in ourselves; nor should we fully appreciate the astonishing love of our Maker. In heaven we shall really and eternally see that we sinned grievously in this life: yet despite all this, we shall also see that it made no difference at all to his love, and we were no less precious in his sight."*

*Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, Chapter 61.*

Sometimes our difficulty in believing God's forgiveness is due to our unwillingness to forgive ourselves. Yet to withhold forgiveness from ourselves is tantamount to not accepting our humanness. Nevertheless we can still fear to do so. It can even seem virtuous to withhold forgiveness, at least until we have expiated our sin and brought everything under control. But in acting like this we absolutize our sin, inflate our own importance and virtually put ourselves on a par with God. The freedom to forgive ourselves shows a healthy estimation of our own fallibility, our essential need of God's mercy, and our ready trust in God. To refuse forgiveness of our own sin is itself a worse sin. My experience of myself and of others who have shared with me is that it is a struggle; yet victory in this struggle is really nothing more (nor less!) than discovery of the Gospel. It is gift, and touches the essence of conversion.

## Owning the Pain

Doing without the actual, anticipated or remembered pleasure associated with our sexual drives and images is painful. I believe that it is important that we own the pain. We want the pleasure but also realize that we cannot have it and be true to our own sense of moral integrity at the same time. Where there is pain and hurt of one kind or another, we can expect also to find a degree of anger, usually unrecognized, but certainly present.

The research done in this area so far shows that most of us priests have not learnt to recognize our feelings easily. I suspect that many of us have not realized the amount of anger associated with our option for chastity. One particular difficulty is tracking down whom we are angry at. There is no one obvious to be angry at, unless it is at the "Church" or the "Pope" for insisting on the law of celibacy (though this particular conflict of desire and personal integrity is not peculiar to celibate priests only, but is part of the experience of anyone, particularly unmarried, who has chosen to live chastely). Feelings are not rational, however, and do not take their direction from our heads, so it is quite possible that we feel unconsciously angry at the Church and its authorities and structures and institutions - an anger we do not express directly, because unrecognized, but act out indirectly and passively, and consequently destructively for both ourselves and the authorities.

It is also quite likely that we feel unconsciously angry at God. Most of us would instinctively deny the possibility. However, since most of our angers are unconscious, so possibly this one is too. A result of this denial is that our prayer can seem consistently dry, God himself elusively distant, and our service of him a kind of driven but reluctant service, or at least not very joyful.

*The Psalmists show a beautiful freedom in their relating to God. They had no problem in expressing their anger towards God. That was itself an expression of their trust. Their prayer was not dry, whatever else it was.*

*Even Jesus, when dying on the cross, felt free to express his hurt: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"*

I think that many priests might also feel angry with women in general, because, except for those who are homosexual, the female sex is the main source of sexual attraction, and so of struggle. Other connected factors also influence our attitudes towards women, but I think that this one may be a definite source of the distance, fear, non-cooperation and even hostility that a number of priests sometimes evidence towards women.

There is little to be gained by suspecting sexuality to be a hidden factor behind every phenomenon, but I also wonder sometimes whether the sexual jokes that are so much part of the habitual currency of clerical circles may at times conceal a degree of unrecognized hostility towards sexuality that we ventilate by humour. Humour is hardly destructive, and may even be an excellent safety-valve, but I believe that a clear recognition of what is going on in us is always preferable to unconscious compensation or substitution, however harmless. The humour can remain humour, but it is even better when any anger has been recognized and owned.

## **Self-Discipline**

Given the inevitable tensions in any life of chastity, it is important to accept the fact that here, as in every field of emotional maturity, self-discipline is necessary. But it is a discipline for the sake of integrity and on the side of life. (The original meaning of "asceticism" is "to fashion by hand" and "to make beautiful".) It is unlikely that we would succeed in living chastely and lovingly if we are not emotionally mature in other areas of our life. Emotional maturity is a state acquired over time that consists in real self-knowledge, acceptance of our own responsibility, a sense of balance, and the self-discipline needed to take hold of these.

## **Prayer**

**To apply ourselves to the pursuit of this maturity, we need motivation. The only motivation that ultimately succeeds comes, I believe, from our closeness to Jesus. It is his call that we answer in accepting our life-style; it is his promise of life to the full that excites and sustains us in times of doubt and difficulty; it is his own spirit and example that inspire us. Only as we accept his invitation to friendship do these experiences keep fresh and powerful within us.**

The deepening of this friendship is the task of prayer. Without constant contact with Jesus in prayer, our chastity either becomes sterile and lifeless or is compromised or abandoned. In my own case, I believe that my relationship with Jesus is not only the necessary condition for my finding celibacy life-giving but is even more the source of my commitment to priesthood and the very reason, perhaps, for my celibacy.

## **Part Two - Celibates and Friends**

I think we may sometimes conceive of celibacy too narrowly and see its specific content as the surrender of marriage. In this view its value would consist in something negative: the hardship and self-denial involved in choosing not to be married. (It is the choice not to marry, of course, that is hard - living not married may be no more difficult than living married!) To choose hardship for its own sake is a kind of masochism. Accepting hardship for the sake of a greater value can make sense.

Properly understood celibacy is one answer to the invitation to live life to the full. We either choose celibacy directly as our preferred option by which to love richly, or we choose priesthood as our vocational way to live our life of discipleship and of open-ended love, and accept celibacy as the context in which we live that call.

We sometimes talk of celibacy as a freedom to love everyone. I feel uneasy about this. It can be too vague and unfocussed. We can only love real people. Jesus talked about loving our neighbour, our brother, one another. He made it clear that we can exclude no one from the sweep of our love. But excluding no one is different from including everyone. To talk of loving everyone may let us off the hook, because it is talking about no one. St John has made it clear that we cannot love God unless we love real people, "our brother" - "Anyone who says 'I love God' and hates his brother is a liar, since whoever does not love the brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4,20). I believe that a similar principle applies in this context. We cannot love "people" in any extended sense unless we love our real "brother". Our call to love needs to be seen as directed to flesh and blood reality.

We obviously love in different ways and to different degrees. But I take it for granted that the quality of our love "at the edges" will depend on the genuineness and depth of our loves "close up". It is the experience of those loves that gives depth to all love, and that gives God the normal channels through which he can change "our hearts of stone" into "hearts of flesh", as he has promised through the prophet Ezechiel: "I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you" (Ezechiel 36,26-27).

### **Friendship**

The normal experience of love "close up" is friendship. I believe that if we cannot and do not love friends, if we by-pass friendship, then talk of other love or of pastoral service in any life-giving sense is very questionable. I think that the quality of our friendships will determine the quality of our other pastoral contacts.

A fruitful life of celibacy requires that we have good friends, and that some of those friends be women friends. Good friends will not be many. We have neither time nor energy to have many deep friends.

*I would advise those who practise prayer, especially at first, to cultivate friendship and intercourse with others of similar interests. This is a most important thing, if only because we can help each other by our prayers, and it is all the more so because it may bring us many other benefits... For people trouble so little about things pertaining to the service of God that we must all back each other up if those of us who serve him are to make progress... Charity grows when it is communicated to others and from this there result a thousand blessings.*

*St Teresa of Avila, Life, Chapter 7*

I gather from what some priests have told me that some systems of priestly training explicitly discouraged close friendships between priests. That was not my own experience; but I do remember that close friendships with women were explicitly discouraged. We were warned to be very much on our guard. These attitudes do not tally with the older tradition of the Church, nor with what we know of the lifestyle of Jesus.

Jesus saw his disciples as friends. One proof of his friendship was his eagerness to share with them all he had learnt from his closest friend, his Father (John 15,15). When he summoned his apostles, he selected those he wanted. The first requirement of their job description was that they be with him (Mark 3,14). For whose sake: theirs, or his own?

Jesus had a specially beloved disciple, and their affection was expressed quite explicitly. Lazarus was apparently another. Jesus had special women friends, Martha and Mary, to name two, whom he particularly loved (John 11,5). And the whole group of disciples with Jesus among them were frequently accompanied by women companions. Other women certainly related in highly affectionate ways to Jesus. Mary of Magdala was one. To claim that it was alright for Jesus, because he was special and eminently different from us, is to avoid the responsibility "to love one another as he has loved us". He most certainly did not warn us against loving each other as he loved us.

The tradition of the Church contains a number of examples among its canonized saints of very close friendships between men and women. And it is equally attested that friends of the same sex were common among the saints. It was not necessarily their sanctity that made their friendships life-giving, but at least equally likely their friendships that contributed to making their sanctity so.

A number of us priests feel awkward with women, or at least a little insecure. Some of us are quite distant and even hostile. This raises some interesting considerations about our relationship with God. Since the image of God is expressed in the double image of man and woman, if we are ill at ease with the feminine, it would seem that there is a whole dimension of the mystery of God with which we are not comfortable.

***A Letter from St Francis de Sales to St Jeanne de Chantal:***

*Christmas Morning*

*Chere Madame,*

*While I was saying Mass this morning, the Lord showed me that the love we have for each other is his gift, and I am to honour you and cherish you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Francis*

Friendship is the best school in which we grow in our capacity and freedom to love. But it is not something that simply happens. It needs to be worked at, and takes time. Ultimately it is gift.

In the fruitful development of any friendship, we can isolate at least four factors: attraction, investment, commitment and celebration. I would like to share a few reflections on each of these elements, especially as they affect those of us living in the celibate state.

**a. Attraction**

Attraction is the usual starting point. Unless there is some degree of mutual attraction, friendship is hardly likely and would at least be hard work. Other loving interactions, especially those with a greater service orientation, may not be based on attraction, and even in relationships that have started with attraction, there can be times when the attraction seems to dim, but if there is never any attraction at all, the relationship is hardly one of friendship, and would not have many of the life-giving attributes of friendship.

We have little control over the experience of attraction (just as we have little control over our dislikes). It happens. In a sense it is somewhat magical. There is something of mystery in it. It can be rather low-key, and usually is so, or it can be at times quite overwhelming. The overwhelming experience is what is called the "in love" experience. Friendship requires much more than mere attraction, but without some attraction friendship wilts.

*One school of psychology would claim that what attracts us in the other is an unrecognized (and sometimes undeveloped) reflection of our own personality. Since we never come to exhaust our self-knowledge, and dimensions of our own richness will always elude us, the possibility of attraction always remains.*

## Falling in Love

It is a common enough experience that, despite our commitment to celibacy, we can nevertheless fall in love. There is nothing wrong in this. Indeed, it is an indication that we are alive and well. It is usually accompanied by some degree of desire for physical expression ranging from simple touch to full genital expression. But it is nevertheless distinct from this, and is specifically relational. Of itself it has no morality. It is an automatic experience beyond our conscious control. What we choose to do in the light of it brings us into the area of morality.

**The fact of falling in love, even when it is felt very strongly, says nothing about our suitability for a life of celibacy. Indeed, it can be fairly inevitable.**

For many of us, certain aspects of our pastoral activity almost set us up for it. For example, we may find ourselves dealing with women in situations of deep emotional stress, perhaps at times when they are hurting or feeling rejected by husbands or other loved ones. Many of us are by nature compassionate men, and our deeper sensitivities are touched by people in need. They find us gentle, and ready to listen, an experience some of them may rarely have had from another male. It is easy for them to fall in love with us. Perhaps even our celibacy can give them a false sense of security that they might not have with other men; or our "non-availability" be an unconscious challenge. Certainly our role as "holy man" or as "wise man" can stir up elements of their own unconscious that they may project onto us and that can give rise to a strong attraction. On our part, many of us have a somewhat low self-esteem, and to experience someone loving us can be wonderfully affirming. Even with a healthy self-esteem, we hunger deeply to be loved. The acceptance and affirmation that we so much need but that we fail to give ourselves we can see in the attitudes of the other. So we on our part can easily fall in love with them.

The homosexual priest's experience is obviously different. But the very fact of belonging to a minority group, feeling perhaps not understood and not accepted (even, or especially, by other priests), can itself be an invitation to conceal a relationship and become a source of strong attraction.

If we realize that falling in love at some time is a fairly predictable experience, we are less likely to be overwhelmed by it. It can be a bit of a nuisance, or a nice feeling, but it need not be very significant. The more balanced we can be as we approach the experience, the less it is likely to affect us. The more we panic, the more we lose control. If we are experiencing a time of emotional low-ebb, we may recognize ourselves as especially vulnerable. Fore-warned is fore-armed, and we can take the necessary precautions to stop ourselves acting inappropriately. Possibly the greatest safeguard against precipitous behaviour is a healthy self-esteem and a gentle compassion towards what we see to be our own weaknesses.

It is also important to keep in mind that it takes two people to fall in love. We are not the only one involved. We may enter into a relationship in a cavalier or selfish way, allow ourselves to get deeply involved and enjoy it, and even behave inappropriately. Later on we think better of it, either because of the call of conscience or simply our fears or even because of the nuisance factor, and break off on the basis of a unilateral decision on our part, leaving the other heart-broken, shattered, and very angry. We need to exercise a very real sensitivity and responsibility when entering, and leaving, any relationship.

*Commenting in the London **Tablet** (19/1/1991, p. 69) on a book by A.W. Richard Sipe, **A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy**, the well-known English psychiatrist, Dr. Jack Dominian, quoted a letter he had received from a woman involved with a priest:*

"For many years I have been in a deep personal relationship with a Catholic priest, and without explaining further I am sure that you will be well aware of the traumas that this involves - for both of us - but particularly that for me of being the 'hidden woman'.... I hurt a lot and know that many other women are hurting in silence. They and I suffer because we are (not? ed.) acknowledged and usually eventually rejected."

*Not only does the woman suffer the fear of eventual rejection. I would also seriously question the overall impact on both partners of a relationship conducted in secrecy and in deception. I would expect that the inability to be honest in public about the relationship would ultimately affect the ability of both partners to be honest with themselves and with each other.*

As a relationship develops, there is value in monitoring it and checking out with each other what it means to us. Misunderstandings can easily occur about each other's intentions and seriousness, and we can misread the real or supposed cues of each other. It is helpful also to realize that expressions of touch can be ambiguous, and may need to be interpreted directly if any misunderstanding is suspected. Flirting might be fun, but it can also be hurtfully misleading.

But to suppress our capacity for affection is to suppress a beautiful gift of our creating God. The feeling of affection is one expression of our capacity for relatedness which is at the basis of all our life-giving pastoral activity, of our concern for justice, and so on. Our minds enable us to see what is right; our wills decide to love and work for justice. But to translate into action our decisions for love or justice, and to act with compassion and genuine involvement, we need the God-given energy components that are part and parcel of our feelings. Our feelings are the irreplaceable energy sources servicing all the will's decisions.



## **b. Investment**

For attraction to blossom into friendship more is needed. Worthwhile friendship does not simply happen; it has to be worked for and worked on. We need to invest ourselves in the relationship. If we feel that we do not have many friends, it may be that we have not made the effort to cultivate them. Simply to wait for others always to take the initiative may mean that we wait forever. Deep friends will normally be few, perhaps no more than three or four in a lifetime, simply because deep friendship calls for considerable investment of ourselves.

Investment starts with choice. From among those to whom we feel attracted, we choose those whom we think would be good friends. Our choice alone, of course, does not ensure that the friendship happens. The other needs also to be attracted in some way to us and to see in us the qualities needed to ensure a happy and life-giving relationship. This calls for further investment of effort to cultivate and consolidate these necessary qualities in ourselves.

*In his famous dissertation on friendship, Aelred of Rievaulx, a Cistercian saint who lived in England during the 12th Century, lists four stages by which one climbs to the perfection of friendship:*

*selection  
probation  
admission  
harmony and benevolence*

*These four stages would seem to be different facets of the one task of investment.*

*In his down-to-earth wisdom Aelred advises against selecting:*

*the irascible,  
the fickle,  
the suspicious  
the garrulous*

*Cf. Aelred of Rievaulx, **Spiritual Friendship**, Book 3, para.55*

## **Real Intimacy**

Friendship deepens as we begin to meet as real persons. There can be a lot of unreality in the initial attraction. We can see in the other what is not really there, and not see much of what is there. Intimacy, in the sense of the readiness to reveal as much of ourselves and to accept as much of each other as possible, deepens. (Intimacy is sometimes spoken of as physical, even genital, contact. It is impossible to change the common use of words, but intimacy in its most thorough sense is not so much the touching of bodies as the meeting of whole personalities).

It is inevitable that the power of mutual attraction diminishes with time. The mere process of spending time together means that we begin to notice the unreality of much of what the attraction was based on. As well, the negative traits that may at first have been hidden deliberately or indeliberately begin to surface - the impatience and intolerance, the idiosyncrasies, the different opinions and attitudes, the laziness and selfishness. In the initial insecurity of the relationship there can be a real reluctance to face this truth and to stay at a level of pseudo-friendship. But unless these things are faced, the friendship can go no deeper. We cannot forever keep pretending. It is too tiring, for a start, and the motivation wanes in time. If the friendship is to deepen, there is no alternative but to take the path towards intimacy.

To reveal ourselves is a risk. We risk the rejection of the real self by the other. We may indeed need firstly to have begun to be friendly towards ourselves. The risk is difficult, but it is the cost of life-giving and lasting friendship. It is particularly difficult to share what we judge to be our own negative characteristics, those elements of our own personality that we ourselves dislike, condemn and even reject, for example, our fears, our angers, our hurts, our desires. It is also difficult to share those things we appreciate but which may seem too precious or fragile to risk their being rejected. Jesus saw a proof of his own friendship with his disciples in his readiness to share with them all he had learnt from his Father (John 15,15).

## **Knowing and Loving Ourselves**

Our own lack of self-esteem hinders the deepening of intimacy. A beautiful thing about real friendship is that the acceptance of us by the other gives us the freedom to begin to own ourselves and to make peace with ourselves. It allows our self-esteem to consolidate.

A further difficulty with self-revelation is lack of self-knowledge. We may not know our inner selves all that well. We may be more victims of our moods and emotions than observers of them. This is a particular hazard for us diocesan priests who so often live alone. In my own case, a whole day can pass without my being confronted with my bad (or good) mood.

Again, the quiet acceptance by another is often the context in which self-knowledge can grow. The other can help us to appreciate our unrecognized gifts and to make peace with our unrecognized weaknesses. Our friend can help us break free from the tyranny of our unrecognized moods, to get in touch with our feelings, to be free to own their existence and even to express them constructively.

Since self-knowledge is a condition for growth in wholeness and in holiness, the intimate love of our friends is of inestimable value.

Another facet of intimacy is our ability and readiness to listen to and to accept our friend. It is one of the greatest gifts we can give anybody. It is the stuff of love. It is what sets friends free to be and to own themselves. It is the channel of healing. This is particularly true when we are ready and able to listen not simply to the spoken words but to the unexpressed and sometimes unrecognized depths behind the words.

*A medieval English spiritual author, better known as the anonymous author of **The Cloud of Unknowing**, in another of his works, described the essence of prayer in this way:*

*"All that I am just as I am offered to all that God is just as he is." (**The Book of Privy Counselling**, chap.5, Image Books, New York, 1973).*

*The same definition could well sum up the essence of intimate friendship.*

*Indeed, the likeness between friendship with God and relationship with friends is close. The whole task of prayer, the intimate exchange of friendship with God, embraces the four characteristics of all friendship:*

*attraction  
investment  
commitment  
celebration*

In intimacy lies the life-giving dimension of all friendship. Understood as the mutual gift and acceptance of two people, it is possible without genital sexual exchange. Certainly the act of sexual intercourse would be a beautifully tangible expression and celebration of such intimacy, but it is not essential to it, nor does it necessarily express it. It is possible for celibates to attain genuinely intimate friendships without it. Indeed, unless they can achieve genuine fulfilling and life-giving friendships, the value of their celibacy could well be called into question.

Yet it is difficult. All intimate friendship is felt as risk. For the celibate it can be doubly painful because the normal dynamic of deep friendship is that it seeks to celebrate sexually. For whatever reason, the celibate chooses to surrender this full sexual celebration, and this is painful.

The strength of the sexual dynamic makes intimate friendship dangerous for the celibate; but the absence of intimate friendship is even more destructive of the personality, of the growth towards holiness, and of life-giving loving ministry.

The well-known psychologist Erik Erikson has outlined the stages of human growth. He sees intimacy developing after a person has achieved sufficient sense of self derived from having found his place in the community. The experience of intimacy allows the person to grow beyond social identity to be able to come to know and appreciate himself as he really is in himself. As the sense of personal identity and the capacity for intimacy deepen, a person begins to desire to give life to others and indeed is able to do so. Erikson sees generativity as based on intimacy.

*Erik Erikson actually lists eight sequential tasks that life sets before us in our journey of human development:*

1. *trust*
2. *autonomy*                      *first faced in childhood and needing ever deepening*
3. *initiative*                      *re-working as further stages are reached*
4. *performance*
  
5. *role identity*                      *begun in adolescence, to be re-worked in adulthood*
  
6. *intimacy*
7. *generativity*                      *the beautiful tasks of early, middle and late adulthood*
8. *serenity*

*The final state of serenity envisaged by Erikson seems to resonate with what Jesus promises to those who follow in his steps and allow the tasks and temptations of life to touch them:*

"I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10,10).

"Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you" (John 14,27),

"I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy be complete" (John 15,11).

## **Facing Reality**

There is a danger that we priests must face - that we think the grass on the other side of the fence is greener. It is inevitable that our desires and fantasies project us into an unreal world. That is their nature. We can be mesmerised by the attraction of the sexual celebration of intimacy for a start. We can also fantasise about the bliss of ongoing married life. No doubt there can be a lot of bliss in marriage. But it is no more an unmixed blessing than is celibate life an unmixed curse! For marriage to be more blessing than curse, both partners have to work at the difficult task of growing in intimacy as does the celibate. The priest who cannot work towards genuine intimate friendships in his celibate state could hardly expect to find fulfilling intimate partnership in marriage. Perhaps sexual celebration can help in the cementing of married love, but it may be more necessary because the potential stresses are more real. There are no short cuts to human growth. As the celibate priest in his loneliness can fantasise about the bliss of having a married partner, the married partner in the midst of various harrassments can fantasise about the bliss of solitude and peace.

*The well-known film actress, Liv Ullmann, was being interviewed on radio not long after she had been through a painful divorce action:*

*Interviewer: It must be different now to feel yourself alone and lonely.*

*Liv Ullmann: Yes, it is painful to wake now of a morning to feel myself lonely and unmarried.... But it was worse to wake up of a morning and feel myself lonely and married!*

Loneliness is the lot of everyone. It is painful. We yearn to be loved. For us diocesan priests particularly our good friends are not with us always, unlike a married couple who are present to each other consistently. It is possible that we may experience our loneliness more acutely, because our times of aloneness are more. And yet loneliness, while being painful, is not without its positive side. Ultimately our hearts were made for God and will not know peace until they rest in him. The celibate's experience of loneliness can be interpreted as a call to seek the heart of God. This does not relieve the loneliness, because the seeking is never fulfilled, but it lets it be fruitful.

It is a sad fact that most people find the effort involved in establishing deep friendships is too much for them to handle. They opt for something less and pay the price in boredom or unresolved hostility. We are familiar enough with the divorce statistics to realize that at least one in three married couples find the strain of relating too much and decide to divorce. I imagine there are many more who do not take that final step but who find their partnership anything but fulfilling. And deep friendships outside of marriage appear to be even rarer.

*"In our interviews, friendship was largely noticeable by its absence. As a tentative generalization we would say that close friendship with a man or woman is rarely experienced by American men. This is not something that can be adequately determined by a questionnaire or mass survey. The distinction between friend and acquaintance is often blurred. A man may have a wide social network in which he has amicable, "friendly" relationships with many men and perhaps a few women. In general, however, most men do not have an intimate male friend of the kind that they recall fondly from boyhood or youth. Many men have had casual dating relationships with women, and perhaps a few complex love-sex relationships, but most men have not had an intimate, non-sexual friendship with a woman."*

Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*,  
Ballantine Books, New York, 1979, p.335

Together with those married couples who have succeeded in making their partnership living and life-giving, we celibates have real scope to show to a disheartened world that genuine friendships can happen. We can also show that the essence of friendship lies not in sexual celebration but in learning to be real, to share, to listen and to accept. Our focus on friendship without genitality can relieve sexuality of an impossible expectation and burden: it need not be something in its own right, virtually independent of loving friendship, but merely a joyful celebration of it.

## **Sterile Alternatives**

The pain of surrendering the sexual fulfilment, and the sense of danger that we might not in fact surrender it, can have the effect of leading us priests to suppress our natural drive towards intimate friendship. As noted earlier, suppression of feeling is always destructive, because feelings do not dissolve; they simply go underground. Suppressed intimacy can seek compensation in a whole lot of inappropriate ways. Addictions of various kinds can develop. One of the more common among us clergy is the addiction to alcohol. (Obviously there can be other causes also of this addiction.) Another common addiction is that of overwork - workaholism. And compulsive overwork can so easily lead on to burnout of one kind or another. Both addictions are destructive of ourselves, and can be destructive of those to whom we minister.

### ***Some Sterile Alternatives to Relating in Intimacy:***

1. *Compensation through addiction:*
  - alcoholism*
  - workaholism*
  - compulsive sport or hobbies*
  
2. *Relating through Power:*
  - manipulation*
  - persuasion*
  - coercion*
  
3. *Twisted Communication:*
  - teasing*

Our modern world is highly socialised and has us constantly interrelating with each other. The Church is no exception. When we do not relate on the basis of openness, of listening, of sharing, of accepting individuality, then inevitably we relate on the basis of manipulative, persuasive or coercive power. This may sometimes be necessary, but it not the basis on which genuine community can be built.

Stories of crochety, cantankerous, bullying parish priests, who expect the whole world to revolve around them and their needs, and indeed who expect people to intuit their needs even without their being expressed, are not uncommon. When intimacy is not present, the only way left to relate is by power.

I also think that the practice of teasing, at least in some instances, is a manifestation of difficulty with intimacy. I like someone, I am afraid to communicate my feeling directly, I am angry at myself for my confusion and my fear, and am angry at the other for not making my situation easier. So I communicate in a way that expresses a degree of interest and even affection in a mildly hurtful way. It is a twisted communication, at least, and leaves the object of the teasing uncertain where she/he stands.

**We priests sometimes complain about the misuse of power in the Church. The solution will not lie simply in re-designing the structures, because structures are composed of human persons. Ultimately the misuse of power will be overcome only as we cultivate in the Church a climate that is open to intimacy, to the importance of individuality, a climate where we are courageous enough to share our deeper selves and are patient and competent enough to be able to listen to the hearts of each other. We learn these skills best within our closer friendships.**

### **c. Commitment**

We have other intimate relationships that are largely one-way ones, for example, a counselling relationship, or spiritual direction. The "client" may share many intimate details about his/her life with us. As counsellor or spiritual director we listen carefully and compassionately, but we do not necessarily share our own inner truth with the other. In this sense, the relationship is not strictly one of friendship, though it is no doubt quite friendly.

Also people may share mutually at great depth and with real honesty, for example, over encounter group workshops, group retreats or group therapy sessions. They relate at a level of real intimacy, yet again their relationship is not strictly one of friendship.

Beyond attraction and intimacy, friendship requires another element - commitment. Commitment speaks of a real dedication to the good of the other. Whereas attraction is usually the starting point and can remain the spice in the pudding, and intimacy is the context, perhaps the essence of true friendship lies in commitment. Commitment touches into what St Thomas calls the "amor benevolentiae" - the love that consists in willing the good of the other. It is also what John Macquarrie refers to in his description of loving as "letting be", enabling the loved one to become, to blossom, to grow.

### **What is Love**

*"...love, in its ontological sense, is letting-be. Love usually gets defined in terms of union, or the drive toward union, but such a definition is too egocentric. Love does indeed lead to community, but to aim primarily at uniting the other person to oneself, or oneself to him, is not the secret of love and may even be destructive of genuine community.*

*"Love is letting-be, not of course in the sense of standing off from someone or something, but in the positive and active sense of enabling-to-be. When we talk of "letting-be", we are to understand both parts of*

*this hyphenated expression in a strong sense - "letting" as "empowering", and "be" as enjoying the maximal range of being that is open to the particular being concerned.*

*"Most typically, "letting-be" means helping a person into the full realisation of his potentialities for being; and the greatest love will be costly, since it will be accomplished by the spending of one's own being."*

*John Macquarrie, **Principles of Christian Theology**, London, S.C.M., 1974, p.310*

\*\*\*\*

*"One result of the mysterious nature of love is that no one has ever, to my knowledge, arrived at a truly satisfactory definition of love. In an effort to explain it, therefore, love has been divided into various categories: eros, philia, agape; perfect love and imperfect love, and so on. I am presuming, however, to give a single definition of love, again with the awareness that it is likely to be in some way or ways inadequate.*

*"I define love thus: The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."*

*M. Scott Peck, **The Road Less Travelled**, Century, London, 1988, p.81.*

\*\*\*\*

*Perhaps the complexity of loving friendship has been touched on by Jesus: to be genuine with ourselves, and to engage sensitively with others. To love is:*

<i>real</i>		<i>Blessed are the poor in spirit</i>
<i>to be in earnest</i>	<i>in self</i>	<i>Blessed are the pure in heart</i>
<i>vulnerable</i>		<i>Blessed are those who hunger &amp; thirst for uprightness</i>
<i>to be with</i>		<i>Blessed are those who mourn</i>
<i>to be to</i>	<i>the other</i>	<i>Blessed are the gentle</i>
<i>to be for</i>		<i>Blessed are the merciful</i>
		<i>Blessed are the peacemakers</i>

In the messiness of real life, commitment involves forgiveness - that contract to continue loving the other as much as before despite the hurts that have been inflicted either indeliberately or even deliberately or even just by being what one is or thinking the way one does.

Commitment calls for fidelity - a dedication that extends over time and indeed is open-ended in that regard. Friendship that is not understood to be on-going is rendered lame from the beginning.



## **Exclusiveness**

But the commitment of friendship does not call for exclusiveness of itself. Indeed, if the friendship is life-giving, it is inevitably open-ended, too, regarding others. A friendship that is exclusive is possessive, an owning of the loved one rather than a setting-free. True friendship presupposes freedom. It is based not on control but on trust.

Among us celibates, particularly, an attitude of exclusiveness would be an indication of something wrong and incomplete in our way of relating. The whole purpose of discipleship is to open in love and availability to others, to our neighbour, to the real people who populate our little world. Celibacy is always subordinate to discipleship. It is a lifestyle that permits a certain kind of availability to the world. The purpose of close friendship among celibates is to foster our own human growth and the life-giving character of our love for others.

If we notice a desire to keep our friendship exclusive by keeping others out of it, or to lose interest in our former friends, there is a strong argument for caution. There can be a natural dynamic leading friendships in that direction, so the tendency needs to be monitored thoughtfully.

A little further along the line from exclusiveness is secrecy. Friends may have secrets. If that is the case, such secrets must be respected. To betray the secrets of a friend is to betray the friendship. What is dangerous, however, is the attitude that feels bound to conceal what is going on between the friends. The significant thing here is the need to conceal, the felt compulsiveness, not simply the fact. If there are things going on between friends, particularly for heterosexuals in a male/female friendship or for homosexuals in an all-male friendship, that one feels one could not share even with another trusted friend, there is ground for some suspicion about the healthiness of the relationship. When we are in doubt about certain elements of a relationship, it can help to talk them over with another trusted friend. It may be necessary to clear this beforehand with the first friend. If the friendship is healthy, one would expect that the first friend would not reasonably object.

### **d. Celebration**

If our friendships are to continue to survive and to give life, they also ask to be celebrated. The cost of intimacy is best balanced by an injection of joy and humour. If the exchanges of friendship are always deep and meaningful, something is lacking. Communities, even communities of two, best take hold of what they are and depth it by stepping back from time to time from the serious task of sharing, listening, accepting and serving. They need to reflect on who and what they are by extricating themselves from the middle of it all and looking on, as it were, from outside and being grateful for what is and what is yet to be. This is what constitutes celebration. It is a stepping back from cold reality into the realm of symbol and the otherwise worthless.

Friends need to waste time with each other. If all our contacts are business-like, the friendship wilts. The symbols can vary from a meal shared, a gift, an evening at the theatre, a postcard, and are limited only by our imaginations and our personal integrity. Since they are symbols, their messages may at times need to be made clear so that any ambiguity is avoided. And in all our behaviour, while not allowing ourselves to be inhibited by pharisaical scandal, Christian charity requires that we be sensitive to the sensibilities of others.

The ability to celebrate friendship and to enjoy life is part of our Gospel witness. The Gospel is good news; discipleship is good news. Jesus wanted his joy to be ours, and our joy to be full.

*The four factors we have isolated as basic to a life of friendship were also substantially considered by Aelred, though he named and ordered them differently. Aelred wrote of love and affection, security and happiness. What we have called attraction would correspond closely to Aelred's affection, investment to security, commitment to love, and celebration to happiness*

*"Love implies the rendering of services with benevolence, affection, an inward pleasure that manifests itself exteriorly; security, a revelation of all counsels and confidences without fear and suspicion;*

*happiness, a pleasing and friendly sharing  
of all events which occur, whether joyful or sad,  
of all thoughts, whether harmful or useful,  
of everything taught or learned."*

*Aelred, **Spiritual Friendship**, Book3, para. 51.*

## Concluding Remarks

St John warns that "a man who does not love the brother that he can see cannot love God, whom he has never seen" (1 John 4.20). Is it an unfair extension to say that a priest who has not a deep friend that he can see cannot be a deep friend of God, whom he has never seen?

I believe that the quality of our friendships mirrors the quality of our intimacy with God. We learn to draw close to God by learning to draw close to our friends. And both friendships nourish each other.

*"... friendship is a stage bordering upon that perfection which consists in the love and knowledge of God, so that man from being a friend of fellowman becomes the friend of God..."*

*"... among the stages leading to perfection friendship is the highest."*

*Aelred of Rievaulx, **Spiritual Friendship**, Book 2, para. 14&15.*

Our sexuality presents a challenge as we grow in intimacy. But a challenge is far from being an insuperable obstacle. Our God knows us since as the creating Father he dreamed about, designed and made us; and Jesus is one of us. At times our sexuality may get out of control. It is such a central dimension of our constitution and so essentially us that it easily gets distorted and distorts other aspects of our personality in turn. This is no mystery to God, nor surprise.

Our need for healing never distances God from us, but is precisely what draws him close. We need not be frightened of our mistakes, our weaknesses, our sins, nor let the consequent guilt feelings allow us to distance ourselves from God. God has planted deep within us a thirst for life and for love: he has made us in his own image. He wants us to keep always searching to become ever more alive, ever more loving. There lies our own fulfilment. There lies his joy. In God's view the goal is apparently worth the mistakes we make in getting there.

The undertaking of a life of celibacy must always be part of a broader determination to live fully and to love richly, or it is a distortion. To bury our talent for life and love out of fear is to have radically misread the mind and heart of God.