

CARMELITES: CHASTITY

When I approached solemn profession, the most difficult question was this: will I be happy? Part of me longed to have an exclusive relationship with someone else. That person would be the most important person in the world for me, and me for them.

This seemed to be the most radical poverty of our life. Not that we could not own possessions, but that we give up owning and be owned by someone else. Was it a poverty that I was prepared to embrace? If I was deprived of that, I feared that I might become a dried-up old stick! I might lose my humanity.

Thomas Merton loved to tell the story from the desert fathers, about a rich woman who wanted to have a pet hermit on her estate; it was the latest lifestyle accessory, like a personal trainer. One day to test his holiness, she sent along a beautiful prostitute. He said to the prostitute: 'I'm a dried-up stick; you are wasting your time.' And so the rich woman shouted, 'That man's a phoney; throw him out.' Fidelity to our vocation is *not* about becoming dried up old sticks! I looked at the old friars in my Province and saw that most of them were fully alive, filled with vitality, and laughter. They had remained young in heart. That gave me the courage to proceed.

So a first question to ponder: Do we care for the happiness of our brothers? If we see a brother who is sad or lonely, do we regard that as our problem or just his? Do we hold back from approaching him in case it is seen as interference? The happiness of the brethren is not just an added extra, as it might be for a hotel manager caring for his guests. We entrust our happiness to the brethren; joy is a sign of the Kingdom, the ultimate happiness for which we are made.

1970 was a difficult time to make a lifelong vow of Chastity. The poet Philip Larkin, famously said that in England sex was invented in 1963. Obviously, he did not mean that literally otherwise there would not have been many English people around. But that was the beginning of the sexual revolution, when sex was always in the air, and sexual fulfilment seemed to be an inalienable human right. Was it right or even possible for someone to make a vow of chastity?

I did not want to religious life to emasculate me. Aquinas said that our passions, our emotions, are the driving force of our return to God¹. We are passionate people, and our desires are God-given and basically trustworthy. They need education, and sometimes we get ourselves into a muddle and desire some illusory good, but desires are fundamentally good and sound. The commandments are given not to limit and suppress our desires but to deepen them and point them in the right direction. They are the signposts of desire. Though Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, said the Ten Commandments are like an examination paper: No candidate should attempt more four!

¹ *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on emotion*¹.

The problem is not that we are too emotional but that we do not desire enough. We are cramped by small emotions, little passions². We need to get passionate. St Augustine said: 'If you wish to pray without ceasing then desire without ceasing'. When I looked at candidates to the Order, I ask: Are they passionate about anything? It does not awfully matter by what: it could be Justice and Peace, or study, or pastoral work or poetry or music. I suppose it might even be for liturgical rubrics, though that stretches my imagination a tad. But there must be some deep passion that is open to the hunger for of God. If they are just complacent, smug, then what will stop them lapsing into total inertia?

Of course, the most fundamental passion of all, obviously, is love. Pedro Arrupe was the superior general of the Jesuits and a saint. The two are not totally incompatible! He wrote: 'Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.'³

So how are we to become passionate celibates? How do we help our brethren to love deeply as celibates? Chastity is embracing a way of loving, not limiting it. All love is an entry into the mystery of the God of love. This divine love is both particular and universal. We have different paths into this mystery. For some, especially the married, their vocation is to be grounded in a particular love. We delight in that particular person who delights in us. As Josef Pieper said, we want to exclaim, 'It is marvellous that you exist!' Marriage is the sacrament of God's particular love. But if it is a calling to the full mystery of the divine love, they cannot remain just stuck in that particular love. It is the ground, the soil in which they are rooted, but they will be stretched open to love others. Children, friends, even crazy religious like us. *Eros* opens itself to *agape*. If they remain just eyeball to eyeball, locked in an exclusive relationship, their love will be suffocating. This is the illusion of the modern romantic idea of love, in which someone else can be everything.

Others, like us, religious, priests and some lay people, have another path into the mystery. We are grounded in the soil of God's universal love. Our vocation is to love the brethren even before we know them; to love the person at the door, the strangers in the parish. Indeed the Greek word from which we get parish, is related to stranger. We are called to love strangers. But it is only a path into the mystery divine love, if *we* discover how to love particular people, deeply, perhaps even passionately. Our *agape* will lead us into a delight in others. There will be a charge of *eros*. Unless we learn to love particular people then our love will be cold and empty. St Aelred, the twelfth century Cistercian Abbot of Rievaulx,

² Augustine But there is another prayer, an interior prayer, which is without ceasing—*desire*. Whatever else you do, if only you desire that *rest* you cease not to pray. If you wish to pray without ceasing then desire without ceasing. Your continual desire is your continual voice; but you will be silent if you cease to love (*Enarr. in Ps. xxxvii.10*).

³ Virgil Elizondo *Charity* New York 2008 p.22

warned religious against 'a love that in addressing itself to all, reaches no one.'⁴ W. H. Auden, the English poet, joked: 'we are here on earth to do good to others. What the others are here for, I don't know.'⁵

So every novice must ask: In which soil am I called to flourish? Which path will lead me into the mystery? It should be difficult. I get a bit worried if a young religious does *not* have to puzzle this one over. Because eros and agape are somehow present in both. They are two aspects of the same love. Even when we love the stranger, unknown people, it is never just disinterested. There is always at least the potentiality for attraction, of being drawn to people, of enjoying them in some way.

Aquinas would agree as did Pope Benedict in his marvellous encyclical *Deus Caritas est*. It is interesting that these two celibates, Aquinas and Benedict, so stress the importance of *eros*. Are we too naive? There was an Irish bishop who had given what he thought was a tremendous sermon on the beauty of sex. He was wandering down the aisle and he heard two women in front of him talking. One said, 'Wasn't that a wonderful sermon the bishop gave on sex?' He smiled smugly. The other replied, 'Yes, but it's just as well that he does not know as much about it as we do.' One of my brethren went to preach at a convent in Edinburgh. He rang the bell and a nun came answered the door. 'Oh it's you father. I was expecting a man.'

We should not be afraid of profound love of men and women, religious and lay. A hundred years ago, Dom Hubert van Zeller, a novice at Downside Abbey, wrote to Bede Jarret, our English Dominican Provincial, in alarm when he fell in love with someone known only as P. Bede wrote back: 'I am glad [that you have fallen in love with P] because I think your temptation has always been towards Puritanism, a narrowness, a certain inhumanity... Your tendency was almost towards the denial of the hallowing of matter. You were in love with the Lord but not properly in love with the Incarnation. You were really afraid... You were afraid of life because you wanted to be a saint and because you knew you were an artist. The artist in you saw beauty everywhere; the would-be saint in you said, "My, but that's frightfully dangerous"; the novice in you said "Keep your eyes tight shut"; If P had not come into your life, you might have blown up. I believe P will save your life. I shall say a Mass in thanksgiving for what P has been, and done, to you. You have needed P for a long time. Aunts are no outlet. Nor are stout and elderly Provincials.'⁶

It is dangerous. Herbert McCabe OP said, 'If you love, you will get hurt, even killed. If you do not love, you are dead already.' It is risky and in our risk-adverse society, people are afraid of insecurity. Health and safety rules everywhere. But Jesus came that we may have life, not safety. Many other religious orders and congregations taught their members to

⁴ quoted by Liz Carmichael *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* London 2004 p. 96

⁵ D. C. Schindler *Communion* Fall 2006 p.394

⁶ Eds Bede Bailey, Aidan Bellenger and Simon Tugwell, *Letters of Bede Jarrett*, (Bath and Oxford, Downside Abbey and Blackfriars Publications, 1989), p.189

beware of 'particular friendships'. As a young friar I was taught to be to be more afraid of 'particular enmities.'

Inevitably there will be crises. Marriages fall into crisis when people become uprooted from the soil of their particular love. Religious vocations fall into crisis when we lose our grounding in that universal love. The Lord says: I will take out your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. Spiritual heart surgery is usually rather more painful and prolonged than the physical version. It may involve living through some sort of affective crisis, often falling in love and being deeply discombobulated! Becoming human is only achieved through crises: there is the wrenching crisis of birth, leaving the warm Jacuzzi of the mother's womb, a physical intimacy that we can never recapture, so that we see each other's faces with astonishment. There is the crisis of giving up the mother's breast, so that we can sit down at table with each other and talk. There is the crisis of puberty, of spots and emotional confusion, hormones dashing all over the place, as one becomes capable of an adult love. I sometimes think that the church is going through a crisis of puberty now.

There is the trauma of leaving home, whether to marry or go to a seminary or whatever. Finally there is the biggest crisis of all, death. You cannot become a loving adult without going through a series of turbulent crises. And so it usually is with us religious too. Affective and emotional crisis is, for most all of us, part of the journey. It is not a sign that one does not have a vocation after all. Rather the reverse. The American brethren gave me a T shirt, which said. 'Have a good crisis'.

So a second question for you: when the brethren have an emotional crisis, do we leave them alone or help them to live it fruitfully? Do we look the other way or grasp this as a moment which the grain can fall into the ground and bear much fruit? Every crisis is a moment in which we grow together or drift apart. The greatest crisis of all was the Last Supper. It is the new covenant, our communion.

Not long after ordination I fell deeply in love with a woman who also fell in love with me. I was profoundly confused. I had recently committed myself to the Order until death and here I was head over heels, imagining another life; marriage was possible, I could have children. But God's providence was hard at work. Here was someone who loved me, but also loved my faith, my vocation, and who was profoundly good, drat it!

What helped was inviting her to stay in my community and meet my brothers. Then she could see who I am, one of the brethren. My life is knitted with theirs. And they could see her and better understand who I was, someone who loved her. Then I could find a coherent life. What I came to understand was that I could only love as the person that I am, and the person that I *am* is someone called to this religious life, to this way of loving, with its intimacy and its fraternity. A vocation is not something that you have and may lose. It is who you are called to be, my path into the mystery of divine love, particular and universal.

So a third question: do your brethren share their friends with the community and the community with their friends? Or is their emotional life a separate area, apart from their religious life? Do we help our brethren to hold together all the dimensions of their lives? Do we share our longing and our loving?

I said at the beginning that chastity implies a certain poverty, that of not possessing another in an exclusive relationship, and not being possessed exclusively too. But perhaps it is more radical than that. Living chastity well includes learning to see people lovingly, reverentially, but unpossessively. We learn how to see people without grabbing them.. We can see the world with greedy eyes, or with eyes that delight without taking possession. Herbert McCabe OP gave up smoking because he found that he looked at everyone who came into the room as a possible source of cigarettes. As the saying goes, 'To a pickpocket, the whole world is a pocket.' So we need to educate our eyes to enjoy beauty without wanting to consume it. It is undoing the greedy eyes of Adam and Eve who looked at the apple and saw that it was good to eat, the beginning of consumerism.

Chastity is about learning to look at people as God looks at us. He looks at us with infinite love, but he gives us space. He does not intrude. He gives us freedom. McCabe again: 'What gives us elbow room, what gives us space to grow and become ourselves, is the love that comes to us from another. Love is the space in which to expand, and it is always a gift....To give love is to give the precious gift of nothing, space. To give love is to let be.'⁷ I don't think that it matters much whether someone is heterosexual or homosexual. The challenges of loving unpossessively are just the same.

I am sure that you have all heard a hundred times the old story of the two desert fathers. They were walking along and came to a stream, and there was a beautiful young woman there waiting to cross, but not wanting to get wet. And so one monk took her in his arms and carried her over. And they went on walking. A couple of hours later the other monk said, 'Father, wasn't it very dangerous to pick up that lovely woman in your arms?' And the first one replied, 'Oh, you are still thinking about her! I left her behind at the stream.

All this takes a long time. According to Vatican documents, we are supposed to have arrived at affective maturity by the time that we make profession. I wonder if I have got there yet myself. I can see in myself all sorts of immaturity. Many priests are wonderful and kind people, but not yet affectively mature.

St Peter is a great encouragement. He took a long time to grow up. At the last supper, he promised fidelity. Even if everyone else fled, he would be loyal. But just a few hours later he denied he had ever known Jesus. 'I know not the man'. And yet when the Risen Lord appeared on the beach, Peter leaps out his boat and goes swimming towards him, because he loves him. I would have been tempted to go swimming in the opposite direction; I would have been so ashamed. Finally, according to the legend, he embraces the vows that he made all those years before. He accepts to die for Jesus. He takes his whole life to learn to live his

⁷ *God matters*, p.108

vow. Finally, at the end of his life, he embraced the vow he had made at the Last Supper and gave his life. Most of us are still on the way.

Peter's secret was that he kept coming back to the Lord, time and again. After every set back, there he was, back in the presence of the Lord, until finally he becomes the man whom he is called to be. We need to have that confidence to come back to the Lord, with whatever we have done and been. A prostitute once came to see one of our brethren and said, 'Father, I am a fallen woman.' He replied, 'No my dear, you merely tripped.' We may trip but let us keep on walking, learning how to love chastely.

So, once again, when the brethren become deeply emotionally involved with others do we see these brethren as problems to be got rid of, or do we accompany them as they live through the crisis with hope? We need to believe ourselves that chastity can be a happy, fulfilling way of life!

The early Dominicans were blessed by deep love between men and women. Dominic clearly loved women. When he was dying he confessed that he 'has been more excited by the conversation of young women than being talked at by old women⁸'. Blessed Jordan, his successor, wrote the most beautiful love letters to a Dominican nun, Blessed Diane d'Andalò, overflowing with tenderness. St Catherine of Siena was surrounded by her circle of beloved friends – men and women, old and young, lay and religious – known as the *caterinati*, the Catherine people. This Dominican delight in friendship found a fresh and peculiarly British expression in Bede Jarrett, who wrote of friendship as 'being to me the most beautiful thing on earth.'⁹

I believe that we religious have a vocation to friendship. It is part of our preaching and mission. After the fall, I cannot think of any easy friendships between men and women in the Old Testament. Then Jesus appears with his community of men and women and calls them all friends. Our society is sometimes sceptical of the possibility of friendship between men and women. In the West, men can even be nervous of the minefield of intimacy with the other sex. We friars can offer, a small sign of Kingdom, a love which does not bind the other person but sets them free..

So. at least in the Dominican tradition, our fraternity should be open to develop into friendship with each other. For Aquinas, the life of the Trinity was the eternal equal friendship of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Our spiritual life is not a private relationship with God, but includes entry into friendship with each other. That means taking an interest in each other; sharing our emotional turmoils at least with some brethren. A joyful, fruitful celibacy is more about solidarity than not having sex. It is grounded in the freedom to share with each other what we live, our sorrow and our joy.

If I fall in love with someone, I may think that I should not burden another brother. But if he is my brother, it is my right to do so, and the highest compliment that I can pay. A

⁸ Ed. Simon Tugwell OP, *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, (Ramsey, Paulist Press, 1982) .p.33

⁹ *Meditations for Layfolk*, (London, Catholic Truth Society, 1941) p.33

wonderful American diocesan priest, Michael Heher, wrote: 'At a time of crisis, people often find the freedom to voice things they ordinarily would not express. A dying woman can give advice to her children; a soldier going off to war can tell his brother he loves him dearly; a father can talk with his daughter about fear and worry and faith as he prepares for dangerous surgery. As men who have suffered as many hits as we have in the last couple of years, we priests can pretty much talk about whatever we want and in whatever way we talk to talk about it. We've earned the right.'¹⁰

If we endure, and let our hearts be broken and remade, we shall acquire hearts of flesh. Then we shall flourish and be deeply happy. We shall be blessed by profound friendships. St Antony the Great was someone who struggled with sexuality, threw himself in the nettles, and finally he became not a dried up old stick, but an embodiment of friendship. Peter Brown wrote: 'He came to radiate such magnetic charm and openness to all, that any stranger who came upon him, surrounded by crowds of disciples, visiting monks, and lay pilgrims, knew which one was the great Antony. He was instantly recognizable as someone whose heart had achieved total transparency to others.'¹¹

So: cherish the happiness of the brethren. Our way of life together should be happy, otherwise it is no sign of the Kingdom. How can we talk of God if we are not happy? And yes, this joy is inseparable from an openness to sorrow. But that is another lecture!

Do not be afraid of going through crisis. If we never have a crisis, we shall probably never grow up. Help each other through crises. Shared they bring us together, unshared we drift apart. The greatest gift we can give to a brother is to entrust him with whatever touches our heart most deeply.

Arriving at affective maturity takes a long time. We should be patient with each other and ourselves. Crisis does not mean that we have lost our vocation, any more than puberty means we have become another person.

In our communities, we should dare to talk to each other. We have the right to speak and the duty to listen. We should not be afraid.

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¹⁰ *The Lost Art of Walking on Water: Reimagining the priesthood*, Paulist Press, New York, 2004, p.120

¹¹ Quoted Michael Heher p.70