

Celibacy is for loving


BY PERRY McDONALD

I've arrived at some conclusions about celibacy based upon trying to live that vow for the past 40 years. I readily state that I am not the sole author of my own conclusions. I have been taught much by my elders, and have learned a lot through living and dialoging with fellow Capuchins. I firmly believe in the providence of God, the prayers of my family, and the love of friends who have cared and worried about me—all mighty forces shaping me.

What I know about living celibately is founded on experiences of myself as sexual, as male, and as one committed to living chastely. We all have stories to share about how we came to understand ourselves in these ways, and some day I hope we will be able to laugh and cry over them together.

For now, let me simply say: celibacy is all about loving. It is the vow in which I make the total gift of myself to Jesus Christ and his gospel being presented to me in the church, made in and through the spirituality of the Capuchin-Franciscan way of life. My sexuality needs to be expressed within a chaste way of life; yet celibacy is not co-terminus with chastity. One could be chaste and still unloving. Celibacy directs my whole life-style and outlook, the way I relate to God, myself, others, including fellow Capuchins. Celibacy is the way that I say: "I love you; I am yours." What I enumerate below is not meant to be understood as moving from the most to the least in importance, but as five significant elements of celibate living.

First of all, it is the way that I say "I love you" to Jesus and all that God has decided to do in and through him. I accept Jesus as the one who has bridged the gulf between God and myself, and who has healed (at least begun to heal) the inner ravages of what has come to me because of my sin or the sin of society which I have taken in as my own. By his dying and rising, I have been saved, and healed. There has been nothing that I did to earn this. It's all grace.



Through baptism and vows I have accepted the grace of God and committed myself to respond with full mind, heart and soul. While each of the vows could be said to contain the full commitment to God's work, for me the vow of celibacy says it the best.

It is to Jesus that each Capuchin must be an open book, with whom one daily says "I am intimately yours." Without this personal intimate relationship with Jesus, our celibate life has no core. How to be more completely open and giving to Jesus — and his kingdom on earth — is a primary task of our lives. I hope that my single life is a sign to others that my primary commitment is to God. All other relationships are seen in relationship to God.

Secondly, by celibacy I say "I love you" to myself. I know that if I am going to live a rich religious life, I have to give quality time to myself for prayer (retreats, scripture reading), understanding and development of myself (continuing formation, study, sabbaticals), as well as recreational needs (vacations, days off). Thank God our Capuchin Constitutions grant us these by right. Only I can take care of my soul.

However, self-care is not the purpose of religious life. Have you ever suspected that a particular friar is more concerned about himself than anyone else? Self-care is a nebulous virtue; it gives permission for all sorts of comfort seeking. We would be well-served if we told a good friend to confront us with self-care gone askew when it is noticed.

Celibacy calls me to be on a search to understand myself so that I can learn how to better respond to God. I need to be intimate with myself, to know all that can be known through the gaze of loving acceptance. I have found it helpful to do this through journaling and through the reflection on my dreams. My dreams surprise and help me with their non-rational images. (It was a dream while on retreat that challenged me to take the risk to write this after I hesitated about the editor's request.) I can tire myself by reflecting and journaling on what my dreams hold up to me. Frequently I conclude that I am a mystery even to myself!

In order to know myself better, I have found it absolutely necessary to have a spiritual confidant. Some find it necessary to have a regular confessor; I have found it necessary to have a spiritual director, and I have had seven of them in the last twenty-five years. I learn about myself as I try to verbalize who I am, what I have done, and what I am thinking. God's love touches me often in simple ways by the presence and words of my spiritual director. I am greatly helped by the reflections of my director, and the

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questions he or she asks of me. I appreciate their reminders of the teachings of scripture, of the official church, and wise spiritual people of the past and present.

Thirdly, celibacy calls me to friendship, even intimate friendships. Others may disagree with me on this, and I would respectfully listen to their experience. But for me it has been most helpful. While celibates do not give the primacy of their commitment to a special other (as married people do), they still must have a place in which they can be accepted and loved for who they are. It is good for celibates to say "I love you" to someone and hear the same in return. To have someone with whom we can be completely ourselves is a great blessing.

The value of this type of friendship hit me like a brick when I fell in love with a religious sister twenty-five years ago. Initially I had many fears, worries, and questions. I knew of no one who had an experience like mine, except those who left religious. It took me a long time to find out how this relationship could fit into a celibate way of life. It took a long time to understand the meaning of natural expressions of physical intimacy.

But with her I found — more than with any other person in my life — that I could be completely honest. Being with her, I learned who I was deep in my soul. From her I learned about my own goodness. She was the first to say to me: "You are a gentle man". With her, I found the value of saying to someone "I am intimately yours."

A major help came to me when I could understand love for each other within the context of our other commitments. I learned to say to her: "I love you, but I'm only sixth in your



life. I give you all the time and space you need to be in relationship firstly to God, secondly to your religious community, thirdly to your ministry, fourthly to your family, and fifthly to anyone who comes to you off the street asking for help. Sixthly comes me, and I desire whatever time and space you can give me for the development of our friendship."

There were many times when I yearned to be more than sixth in her life. But given time, space, patience and acceptance of our relationship by lots of people, it has settled into a peace-filled and satisfying relationship. Even while we are sixth in each other's lives, we consider our friendship one of the greatest gifts God could have allowed. Considering her love for me has led to contemplation and an understanding of God's love for me in Jesus.

There is a phenomenon that I have occasionally observed among religious sisters that bears reflection. I have heard about sisters who have lived together in an apartment and have worked together for many years. They are friends, but I have heard some of their fellow sisters denigrate their friendship by saying "its like they are joined at the hip." It would help us understand the many possible shades of community life if those who have such an experience of friendship would share the personal meaning they have found within it, and how they judge it fits in the context of religious life. Such openness I pray for; it can only be good for religious life and the church.

Fourthly, celibacy pushes us to demonstrate that "I am yours" to all those we meet in ministry. Our care for others springs from the love that God has for others which the Spirit has placed in our hearts. The degree of intimacy we share with others in ministry will vary depending on their pastoral needs, but still must be expressed in warm human

ways while respecting appropriate boundaries. Indeed, this manner of ministry, especially to those marginalized by society, has often been noted to be the hallmark of Capuchins.

Capuchins will also find themselves stretched in their loving of family members. Our ties of blood call us, like the rest of our family members, to respond to needs of parents and siblings while trying to balance all of our other real commitments.

Fifthly, friars need to say "I am yours, even intimately so" to other friars. I presume, here also, that there will be disagreement to this statement.

To allow such to happen, friars must be willing to give their fellow friars a priority in their lives. While I have heard it said that a particular friar uses his local community like one uses a motel, most friars willingly serve their brothers in small but real acts of charity and daily concern. We pray with and for each other; we gladly pitch in to help the community go about its daily tasks, and arrange personal schedules to be available to the community. Some friars do outstanding acts of charity. We all do quiet acts of charity by abstaining from chocking our brother for his idiotic words or actions.

But it is evident that we have a vastly different way of looking at the priority we give each other. Some friars, it appears, want a distant relationship while they live alone. They connect through the common history that was shared in initial formation, or by being known publically as a Capuchin, or by being financially linked to province headquarters, or by desire to return to a community upon becoming sick or elderly. These friars find their primary identity in and through ministry in the church.

Other friars choose to live alone, yet have active connections to the friars by involvement in fraternal gatherings or committee membership. They, too, like distance from most of the friars. Perhaps these friars manifest the complaint that I personally feel sometimes, that ministry is so draining that one does not want to (or can't) return to a community of friars and continue to work at relationships there. These friars make a major point: community-making takes work.

Some friars have demonstrated that they cannot form healthy bonds in a community, and are actually destructive to community. They — and the fraternity — are blessed by their living alone.

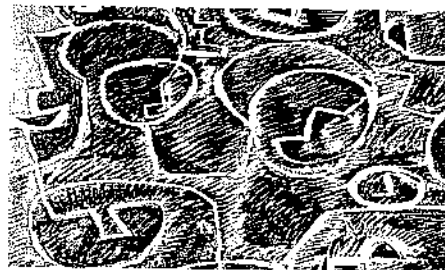
Some say we should recognize the reality that Capuchin fraternity is a "big tent" allowing many expressions, allowing friars to choose their degree of connectedness. "Everyone does it anyway whether living actually with other friars or alone," some argue. But I'm not satisfied with this. I agree with the recently published provincial plan of the Province of St. Joseph which states: "Our Capuchin tradition does not necessarily call us to live under the same roof; it does, however, give primacy of place to aggregate (community) living because it is there that we struggle to bring about the Reign of God we proclaim to others...It is daily life with our brothers that prods us to constant conversion and authenticity."

Capuchin life calls us today — more than ever — to say to friars in community: "I am intimately yours". Our general minister, in his letter "Evangelical Brotherhood", called us to a "mental and spiritual journey" and as "...a fraternity to engage in serious reflection in the light of the gospel" adding that "it is not sufficient that the brothers individually read about the world and national events." (2.2).

The Province of St. Joseph's recently published provincial plan states that all friars must either live in a community of 3-5, or be in relationship to a community, and that monthly review of life, faith sharing or theological reflection take place among them.

These goals require intimacy, self-revelation or self-disclosure. To do these we need to speak honestly about ourselves, sharing our successes, failures, and approaches to living the gospel and Capuchin life. It means speaking personally, trusting ourselves to our brothers; trusting in a reciprocity; trusting that the fragile selves we reveal to others will be gently cradled in their hands and loved.

I believe that being intimate with fellow friars is part of my commitment to celibacy. All that I have learned about my self, including my sexual self, all that I have learned about how to channel my sexual self through religious chastity, all that I have learned through my relationship to Jesus Christ and the living of his gospel, all that I have learned



by attempting to be intimate with God, with self, and with others, is fodder for "serious reflection in the light of the gospel." Our movements toward reviews of life, faith-sharing or theological reflection will need to move forward through small increments, but move forward nonetheless.

Since my election, I have been blessed to have such moments with members of the Provincial Council of the Province of St. Joseph. On two mornings each month, we pray together for over an hour, and reveal to each other both what our previous month has been like (review of life), and how we view ourselves in relationship to something of the gospel (faith sharing). I find our prayer immensely gratifying. Sharing together in this way, I find myself drawn more to love them, and to wonder how they are doing during the weeks that separate our coming together. Perhaps the mixture of personalities is just right, since we have not found any major disagreements among us. I attribute much of our getting along to our faith-sharing; it has opened the door for us to patience, self-giving, caring; it has removed previous suspicions we may have had of each other; it has helped us to work until we come to consensus. Faith-sharing has led to deeper fraternity and better ministry.

It does take hard work and deliberate choice to be intimate with each other. The members of the Province of St. Joseph, and all friars who wish for a deeper experience of fraternity, are faced with a mighty challenge of sharing their lives together in deeper ways. Actually, I believe it is a challenge to respond to the vow of celibacy; perhaps it also is the ultimate sign of our success at living as celibates.

We live as Capuchins to promote the Reign of God. Celibacy is one way we do that by loving God, ourselves, friends, those to whom we minister, and fellow friars. Foundational to living celibately is understanding ourselves as sexual, as males, and guided by hard-earned understanding of the principles of religious chastity.

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