

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cardinal Scicluna of Malta gave an interview to his local newspaper earlier this month. Among the topics he discussed was celibacy, the promise that most priests and some deacons make to refrain from marriage. He said it was time to “discuss the issue seriously” and “take decisions on it.” He asked, “Why should we lose a young man who would have made a fine priest, just because he wanted to get married? And we did lose good priests just because they chose marriage.” He noted that Churches in the Oriental Rite give their priests the option to marry.

It’s not likely we’ll see any movement on this in the immediate future. Every generation debates this topic. People often explain celibacy as giving priests more time to be with others, but at an ordination, the bishop says something else when candidates makes this promise: “Celibacy is both a sign of pastoral charity and an incentive to it, as well as a source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world.” Celibates are to “cling more readily to Christ with an undivided heart” and devote themselves “with greater freedom to the service of God and others.” Married ministers of any denomination manage to serve Christ and their family. Most of us priests find that celibacy opens a door to relationships with some people who share with us things they may not otherwise discuss.

In the New Testament, Jesus teaches the permanence of marriage, but then says, “Some... have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.” Traditional examples of New Testament celibates are John the Baptist, John the apostle, and Jesus himself. Mary, of course, is in a class by herself—both virgin and mother.

St. Paul raises the topic in his First Letter to the Corinthians. In the verses just before those we hear today he explains the responsibilities of those who are married and of those who are unmarried. He says, “because of the present distress... it is a good thing for a person to remain as he is.” Unmarried Corinthians faced graver concerns than finding a spouse. Today’s verses sum up Paul’s thinking: “the time is running out.... The world in its present form is passing away.” For Paul, too many people worried about getting a spouse, unreasonably following emotions, and buying unnecessarily. To overcome such materialism, Paul advises five times to live “as not”: as not having a spouse, as not weeping, as not rejoicing, as not owning, as not using the world fully.

The stoics of Corinth strove to master themselves above world events and emotions. Stoics were not disinterested in others; they contemplated more important matters, developing an evenness of spirit. Our culture wants emotions to lead the way, seeking happiness in sex and possessions. To meet someone who has promised celibacy or poverty confronts a person about their life goals. “If Jesus is calling me to follow him, what must I give up in order to do that?”

Paul says the world is passing away and summons us to a high standard. The Catholic Church calls its members to chaste sexual relationships within marriage, not before marriage, and not with other partners after marriage. Whether we are single or married, Paul challenges us to choose goals that bring eternal pleasure, not immediate pleasure, to overcome the world and to live for Christ.