

A Brief Note on Celibacy

by Paul F. Ford

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Celibacy is certainly a way of “putting your money where your mouth is.” It means: I believe the message I preach, I practice it. That message is ingeniously simple: God so loved this world and all of us in it that he sent us his Son. This Son tells us that his Father loves us completely, down to this most insignificant detail, right down to the number of hairs on our head. This detail may be insignificant (or nonexistent, as the case may be) but the panorama is not.

When I am celibate, I am no longer permitted to simply talk a good line (or merely tell the Good News, for that matter). I am, kernel and cob, committed to the creed which says to me before it says to anyone I teach: I believe that I am loved by an indulgent, even foolish Lord, that he knows my need to be loved in its most insignificant details, and that he will continue to do “something” about it. That “something” he does is what he always does for the person who is gullible enough to swallow his line: “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the Good News, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brother and sisters and mothers and fathers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come, eternal life.” (M 10:29f)

Notice, stuck in with the enumeration of these wonderful rewards, there is a sign that this is truly the Lord speaking to us: “with persecutions.” He knows how difficult he can make a person’s life (“Happy is he who does not find me a stumbling block” Mt. 11:5) but he also knows that following him is the least difficult of any of the ways a person may choose (“My

yoke is easy and my burden light” Mt 11:30).

There is one other thing to notice about the passage from Mark: the emphasis on eternal life. Put into perspective, a lifetime of celibacy is nothing more than temporary insanity. The same Lord who holds out the hope of a new heaven and a new earth completely beyond the imagination of those who love him (1 Cor 2:9) is the one who addresses the call of celibacy to those who can take it (Mt 19: 10). You who are trying to determine if the Lord has so called you should remember that the violent are the ones who take the kingdom (Mt 11:12) and that the Lord praised the craftiness of the dishonest servant (Lk 16:1–9) who risked much for a secure job. How much more ought you a child of the light and of the Lord’s promise, invest in the kingdom fifty or so years of celibacy so that you can have this kingdom for yourselves and for others for eternity?

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The meditation above was written for my seminary classmates in 1972 when we were about to make a lifelong commitment to celibacy. After these many years I would add only one further biblical theme: that of the extravagance of Mary of Bethany when she poured out over Jesus’ feet perfume worth a year’s wages (Jn 12.1–8). What a waste the calculator, the cautious investor in us says. But it is for him! the lover in us replies. Mk 14:3 adds an intriguing detail: the jar was broken open, signifying both the violence of the process and the irrevocability/irretrievability of the process. But for Whom? we need continually ask.