

Single & Celibate

or

Heavenly Sexuality:

Australia, 2008

People can expect to be single longer than at any other time in history. Adolescent hormonal development commences at younger ages, while marriage tends to be delayed. Stats show that the average age of marriage for men in Australia in 2001 was 31, compared to 26 in 1981, and for women the average age of marriage was 29, compared to 23 in 1981. This creates an average waiting period of sexually capable singleness, just short of 20 years. For many its longer. Our media driven society hounds the

message, 'if you're not getting it, you're not getting it!', which places immense pressure on the young and single to become sexually active!! Miranda Devine wrote recently in the SMH, "It is now impossible to shield children from a culture dripping with sexual imagery, in which Saturday morning cartoons are interspersed with soft-porn music videos, pole-dancing kits with sexy garters are marketed to little girls and huge billboards for "Longer Lasting Sex" dot the landscape.....Despite the protestations of publishers of such magazines as *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* that their target market is 16-year-olds, Gale pointed out the preponderance of 11, 12, and 13 year-olds featured in their pages, along with stories about anal sex." ¹The pressure is on from the onset of puberty and before.

And, of course, given the increasing rate of marriage breakdown, so often caused by the breaking of marital fidelity, there are increasing numbers of people returning to singleness.

Nazareth, 32AD

Jesus said "There are also people who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven! He who is able to accept this let him accept it." Matthew 19:12 Jesus honoured those who set themselves apart to practice purity for Him and His kingdom .

What does it mean to become a eunuch for the Kingdom of Heaven? Today it can be viewed as either a life long vocation, or celibacy for the often indeterminable period that one remains single. some will choose lifelong celibacy, sacrificing

- sexual relationship and marriage in order to

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others will recognise that they probably have 20 years in which they will be single, and will choose to abstain from any sexual experience to testify to God's purpose for sexuality

Choosing Purity for Jesus

- honour God with their sexuality by devoting themselves to a vocation for the Kingdom of God as a single person, unencumbered by the demands of family for their entire life.
- others will recognise that they probably have 20 years in which they will be single, and will choose to abstain from any sexual experience to testify to God's purpose for sexual intercourse, to keep themselves pure for their probable spouse, and to keep themselves free from the contamination of sexual sin for their worship and service to God, and His Kingdom. The 20 or 30 years that one may choose celibacy before marriage probably equates with the period one may have chosen it for life, in Biblical times. Life expectancy then was considerably shorter than today:

"Roman tombstones show that the life expectancy of women was 34 years as contrasted with 46 years for men (women often died in child-birth)." ²My point? To chose celibacy for an average period of 20 years is to choose a period of sexual abstinence

not much shorter than the lives of the eunuchs who devoted themselves to the Kingdom, whom Jesus honoured. To understand why celibacy is a

gift to God and a witness to the kingdom of Heaven, we need to understand the true meaning of sex.

Why did God create sex? and How does He want us to celebrate it?

Certainly He gave the gift of sex for procreation and for pleasure, but He means it to be much more than that!

Sexual love is the declaration of the one flesh union of marriage. It is the sign and expression of the exclusive love and lifelong commitment between man and wife, and is a gift kept especially for and between them. Kept in this way, it enhances and strengthens their love.

While this is its earthly meaning, *sex also has Heavenly dimensions! God gave us sexual desire as the fuel of a rocket that's meant to launch us to the stars and beyond.*³

Sexual union was given *from the beginning* to foreshadow **the union of God and man**, of Christ and His Church.⁴ God created Eve for Adam because it was not good for Adam to be alone. In taking her from his rib, He fashioned her with similarities and differences. The similarities were their human flesh, soul and spirit, fashioned in God's image. The differences were aspects of his

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Divine character which Adam's masculinity didn't reflect, and which Eve's femininity did. Adam didn't yearn for the animals, but for the flesh which was intrinsically the same, yet mysteriously different. He yearned for what was missing in him, yet beautifully present in her. She yearned similarly. Aspects of the Divine nature, missing in themselves, were seen in each other. Their very sexual organs were alluring, reflecting the core of who they were created to be, reflecting different aspects of the One God in whose image they were both made. She was receptive, grounded, contained, reflecting God's wisdom, stillness and peace. He was an initiator, thrusting outward, to achieve, reflecting God's power, strength and dominion. In consummating their love and becoming one flesh, they found a deeper completion, becoming more like God together, than they were single. But that wasn't quite enough! They still had need for God in His fulness. Their final completion was in the life and union they had with Him, when He met with them 'in the cool of the evening'. When they lost their fellowship with Him through their sin, their one-fleshness became troubled and their deepest yearning for God, lost deep in their souls.

In the sentence of death which Adam and Eve were given, sex, powerful because it reflects the divine, became potentially destructive. Sex is extremely powerful, bursting with pleasure and passion, just because it

- is a deep soul yearning for completion by another, a searching for the divine image in them
- expresses the very essence of God, love, and
- releases His energy, to create marriage and to procreate.

When it was yielded to the serpent in the Garden, he took sex captive, stripped it of its sanctity, and rendered it self centred, lusty, greedy, readily abused through power and manipulation, perverted, and wounding. He set out to defile God's image in

man, so attacked sexuality where God is so profoundly reflected, to leave a battlefield of pain, wounds and emptiness, in the human soul and relationships. The current social emphasis on sex without sanctity renders people wide open to wounding. Abused in this way, sex deprives the person of the very fulness it was created to give!

Celibacy is not merely an escape from the possibility of such pain. It has a pain of its own. That of quenching the power of passion within, and of making peace with solitude; of transforming aloneness, yearning connection, to solitude, finding fulness. The person choosing to embrace celibacy for the Lord, is all too aware of, but foregoes the beauty, sacredness, passion and joy of marriage and one flesh union on earth. Instead they set their hearts on the ultimate truth to which sexuality and marriage point: the marriage of Christ to His Church. They anticipate and set their hope on the fulness of love, joy and fruitfulness of union with Christ which fills eternity. Marital sex prefigures the much greater glory, ecstasy, and bliss that awaits us in heaven. When singles choose celibacy in devotion to the Lord, they recognize this transcendence to which sex points. They assign sex a value much higher

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than mere human ecstatic experience and relational commitment. They emphasize that part of sex which is the search for the divine and its

foreshadowing of the truth about our eventual union with God, through Christ, in Heaven. The Kingdom for which some choose celibacy is the fulness of God's bounty toward man and the ultimate fulfilment of all that he desires. The ache of solitude that celibacy will highlight directs the celibate's longings for connection, to union with the Lord.

As Jesus said to the woman at the well, who had unsuccessfully sought love and completion with so many men, '*If you knew the gift of God...you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.*' Jesus was pointing to the fact that in Him there is something much greater than marriage. Apart from being the relational foundation of society, marriage is an icon, a sign of something greater. Paraphrasing Pope John Paul II, *marriage doesn't express definitively the deepest*

Eugene Peterson expresses it well in his paraphrase of Jesus' reflection of life in Heaven in Matthew 22:30 "At the resurrection we're beyond marriage. As with the angels, *all our ecstasies and intimacies will be with God.*"

meaning of sexuality. It merely provides a concrete expression of that meaning within history. In Heaven there will be an entirely new expression of our call to life giving communion.

By faith, and grace those who choose celibacy are able to forego the ecstasies of sex outside marriage, or maybe for the

whole of life, to testify to, and draw from, the reality of intimacy with God in Heaven, through communion

with the Holy Spirit. This is true Christian hope, which stands opposed to the utilitarian, often lust driven, self pleasing, gossip producing spectacle that sex in the world has become, as the antidote to the loneliness, brokenness and emptiness which it, itself, often causes.

How is it possible to choose celibacy in a sex charged world?

Rather than seeing abstinence as negative, in terms of what is not experienced, it is better to highlight what it does embrace, anticipate and participate in: union with God and the heavenly marriage. We need, however, to be careful not to not become so heavenly minded that we divorce ourselves from earthly pressures and reality. But to reclaim the spirituality of sexuality, to bring these two sides of one coin together, so that one better informs the other, is an antidote to the licentious philosophy of worldly sexuality. To make the emphasis less physical and more spiritual gives both the single and married person a different framework to view sex, which reduces the pressure and changes the motivation for sex.

To have such a comprehensive understanding of sex is **to have SOMETHING worth believing in**, something TRUER, MORE NOBLE than the message the world around us offers. Selwyn Hughes teaches how to dispel the passion of desire which pushes personal boundaries. Its to have a higher and stronger desire. Its to have a higher value of sexuality and of honouring God who gave us the gift. The fire of God's love burning in our hearts is the only fire that can engulf and extinguish all other fires. None of the boundaries we build in our lives

can save us unless the fire of God is at work within us⁵.

Alongside such inner motivation we need **outward support**. The celibate's hope of the ecstasies of union with Christ in Heaven, will be as a member of His Bride, the Church. We can foretaste the communion then in community now. Active fellowship within the Bride, the church which Jesus has betrothed, and is preparing for Himself, enables the single to work out the rigours of celibacy.

Fellowship provides opportunity to be honest about feelings, explorations, temptations and challenges.

It provides place for confession, absolution, prayer for strength, affirmation of worth, and a sense of mutuality. Such transparent communication is an aspect of intimacy. The more opportunities for non sexual intimacy that people have, the more connected they will be, the less will be their craving for completion, and the easier it will be to resist sexual temptation.

Offering wisdom, support, true friendship and forgiveness strengthens the celibate lifestyle.

Through Christ's body on earth we fellowship with Christ in Heaven.

For those who hope to marry celibacy provides good foundation for marriage:

Understanding God's good reasons for sexual abstinence outside marriage helps to keep the boundary. The Biblical norm of abstinence before marriage establishes firm foundation for marriage. Resisting sex before marriage is not a kill joy. Rather, **its delay brings a much fuller joy to sex** at the time for which God created it. It resists this society's obsession with 'instant grat' to savour a much greater gratification at the consummation of marriage, as the sign of the lifelong covenant that the bride and groom make. On the wedding night they express, celebrate and unite physically all that they discovered of each other, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and romantically during their courtship. Celibacy before marriage is God's

way of giving foundation to marriage, based not on sex, but on a fulness of relationship.

A special kind of euphoria about their sexual union is experienced by those who wait for marriage. Their patience, mutual respect

and greater clarity in addressing preparative issues for life and sexual relationship together **develops an abiding trust and consideration for each other**. It gives opportunity to dream dreams together and to make plans to procure them, to

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express concerns, hesitations, fears and to work through them together. Willingness to wait and to endure the

strains of abstinence

strengthens both character and

their marriage. *Sex per se* is realised not to be the most important part of their relationship; they themselves are. Engaging in premarital sexual intercourse, or 'lesser' forms of it, such as heavy petting, oral or digital masturbation, give a false sense of euphoria, which precludes working through the necessary foundations for a marriage which lasts.⁶

Faithfulness and chastity before marriage ensure greater faithfulness and chastity during marriage. And because of pregnancy or illness or times of separation, all couples must abstain at some time in the marriage; the acquisition of the virtue of self-mastery before marriage facilitates such necessary abstinence.

Honesty and security grow through

abstinence. Sexually active single Christians find it difficult to be open about their actions, because of their blurring of biblical standards.

Maintaining secrecy about sexual sin is a form of deceit, which undermines integrity. Couples, observing that each other is open to this, leave a door open to deceit in their marriage, and an underlying doubt about the full trustworthiness of their spouse. Sex before marriage increases the chance of cheating within marriage. Statistically, the more sexually involved people are BEFORE marriage, the more likely they are to commit adultery AFTER marriage.⁷

Yet another reason is that many Christians feel terrible **guilt at violating their own deeply held moral principles.** After marriage this can lead to a hidden perception of intercourse as furtive, which subsequently undermines the joy and celebration of sex in marriage.

To conclude, Jesus' call to sexual purity is no more radical now than it was then. Sexual promiscuity, in all its current forms was widely practised in the Roman world. Israel had, unfortunately, been renown for its playing the harlot with the sexual gods of the age. Just as He gave grace then, He gives it now, perhaps more so. For since then He has Died, Risen, Ascended and Poured out His Spirit into our hearts! He gives power to the weak, and desire for purity. Those who are virgin, He calls you and fills you with His Presence, affirming

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your completion in Him, and His power in you to maintain your purity. He delights that you choose to offer your sexuality as a sign of His Kingdom, to be complete in the power of His love for, and in you. In temptation He provides the way of escape, and in your consecration, He provides grace for purity.

To those of us who have been married, but are no longer, or who have been sexually active as singles, He offers a new start. Where our hearts lust, He opens our eyes to behold, and be allured by His greater beauty. Where our minds have become embroiled in fantasies and unclean or obsessed longings, He pours out His Spirit to give Heavenly dreams and visions. And where our bodies have been joined to another outside marriage, He washes us clean, and pronounces purity. Where we are caught up in sexual compulsivity, let us set our hearts on Him. He will lead us to His freedom. Where the temples of our body have been so desecrated by perverted practice, and we feel so defiled, so ashamed, so unclean, He forgives,

delivers and fills our bodies, souls and spirits with His glorious Presence, to make us the new people He promised to re-

create. Jesus restores our purity. He makes us virginally clean, and blesses us to consecrate ourselves and to start afresh!

Let Jesus' Church shine as bright lights in this dark world. Let our sexuality, whether in marriage or singleness, be a witness to the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us choose celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in marriage. To Christ Jesus be glory in the church!

¹ Miranda Devine SMH May 22, 2008 Moral backlash over sexing up of our children

² encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia

³ Christopher West A Theology of the Body for beginners p57

⁴ Ephesians 5:25-8

⁵ (current issue 29/5)

⁶ BURTCHAELL, JAMES TUNSTEAD For Better For Worse: Sober Thoughts on Passionate Promises New York, Paulist Press. 1985

⁷ Andrew M. Greeley, Faithful Attraction: Discovering Intimacy, Love and Fidelity in American Marriage (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1991