

Fr. Joe Bambenek

Mass of Thanksgiving at St. Peter's in the Loop Catholic Church, Chicago

9th Wednesday in Ordinary Time, Cycle II; Memorial of Sts. Marcellinus and Peter

June 2, 2010

2 Timothy 1:1-12

Psalm 123

Mark 12:18-27

A decade ago, when I would attend daily Mass here at St. Peter's during business trips to downtown Chicago, I was seriously wrestling with the call to priesthood. One important dimension of the struggle was the decision to live a life of permanent celibacy which following the call would entail. At the time it seemed that the Church asked too much of Her priests; that celibacy was so unnatural, and that it would be too big of a sacrifice to make.

With a deeper theological understanding now, I can say that my feelings had a certain legitimacy. At the same time the Church requires celibacy from Her priests, She also strongly teaches that marriage and human sexuality are great gifts from God. The union of man and woman is, on the natural level, the most fitting image and embodiment of God's self-giving loving nature. The fruit of spousal love, in which husbands and wives give their very bodies to the other, is a deeper connection between the two and the gift of new life with God's cooperation. The Apostle Paul talks about how the relationship between a husband and wife images the relationship between Christ and His Bride, the Church. Lest the analogy be stretched too far, the spousal relationship is merely an image, a spouse cannot be the person's savior as Jesus is for the Church. Nevertheless, celibacy is a real sacrifice as it means giving up that which the Church teaches to be so good in many dimensions. So then why must priests remain celibate?

There are several answers to that question. One of them has its roots in today's gospel passage. As Jesus deftly answers a question designed to entrap him, He provides us with a glimpse of heaven, and along the way, an understanding of marriage. In particular, Jesus clarifies that marriage does not exist in heaven.

Marriage is a permanent earthly reality, but when one of the spouses die, the marriage is over. This fact seems quite stark, and can leave us asking ourselves: why did God design marriage in this way? As I said before, marriage is a prophetic sign on Earth of God's love which is more fully experienced in heaven. When a spouse dies, there is no longer need for marriage to be an image of God's love, as the deceased marriage partner is then either experiencing the fulfillment of the image in heaven or, tragically, he or she is not. In fact, a side point is a reminder that a fundamental objective of Christian spouses should be to help each other reach heaven.

With a similar understanding, priestly celibacy is a prophetic sign of what heaven is like: where we are loved and we love, but do so in a non-sexual way. Like those in heaven, the priest is to live a life devoted to praising God and living out self-giving love. Celibacy is a way of pointing to this heavenly reality through how a priest lives his life on Earth. In theological terms, celibacy is an eschatological sign. The celibate witness in the world is to be a reminder to all that we are only pilgrims on this Earth, we are not here forever. We have a lasting home in the next life in heaven toward which we should be orienting our lives. In the process, the priest lives out God's love in a way that does not procreate new souls, but which brings God's life and love into the spiritual lives of those he touches.

Thus, the celibacy of a priest and the fruitful, faithful, and permanent commitment of marriage are not as different as they seem at first. When lived as God created them to be lived, marriage and celibacy both point to the self-giving and fruitful love of God and to the heavenly future that awaits those who live out those vocations faithfully. Both vocations are sacred and sacrificial. They are both intended to be the source of great joy for those who live them. Both of them can be filled with much joy and fruitfulness, and both of them produce fruit through

sacrifice and gift of self. And the vocations are intended to support one another: good priests need to have healthy and meaningful friendships with people in good marriages; and married persons need to witness holy celibate priests living faithfully... for they are both incarnations of self-giving love.

If any of you are sitting in the same place literally and figuratively that I was a decade ago, struggling with God's call in your own life, I encourage you to open your heart with trust to God's desire for your life. There is no vocation that does not entail suffering and sacrifice. It can be easy to focus on one aspect of a vocation, either disproportionately on its sacrifices or its joys, rather than the whole picture. The path that will bring us the most joy and fruitfulness is when we live the vocation God created us to live. And God will give us the grace, the strength we need to live out His will for our lives. When we do so, when we faithfully follow His will for self-giving love in our lives, whether it be to marriage or a celibate commitment, we can experience a foretaste of the great heavenly joy and point others to God in the process.