

Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. ~ John 15:13

CHRIST CALLS ALL to holiness — to the perfection of charity. Some are called to the public profession of vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in a society or permanent state of life approved by the Church.

The religious — one who lives in a religious community — chooses to live a life totally dedicated to God, focused primarily on the attainment of glory in the world to come.

Ordained priests and bishops of the Church in the Latin Rite are men who have vowed to remain celibate (unmarried, and therefore abstaining completely from sexual relations) for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. (Bishops of other rites are chosen from unmarried priests, and those who are ordained to the priesthood before marriage may not marry.)

Celibate men give themselves solely to God, to serve his people with an undivided heart. Celibacy is embraced not because marriage is not desired, but because the work of God is more greatly desired. *“I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife”* (1

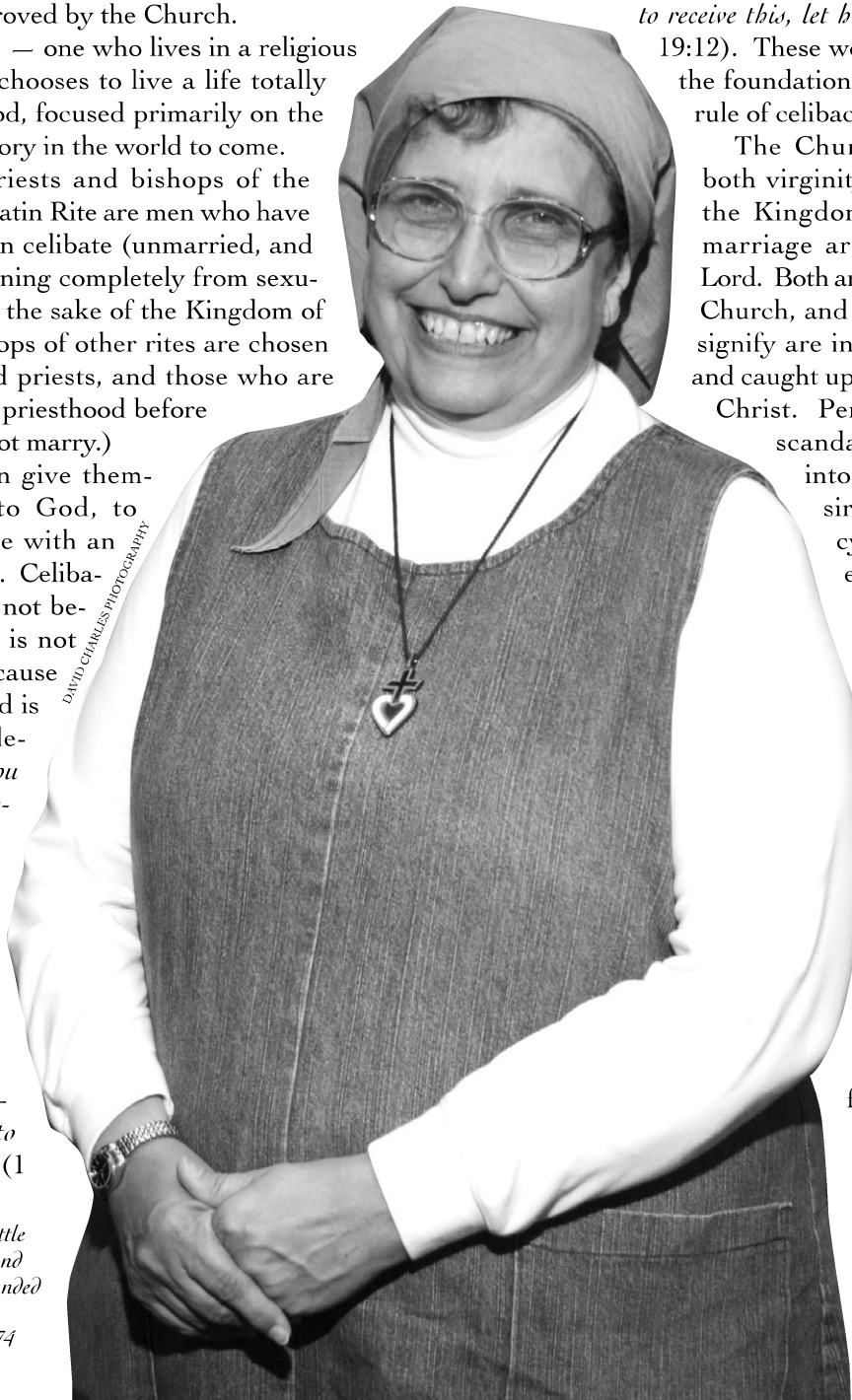
A sister of the Little Sisters of Jesus and Mary (LSJM), founded in Baltimore, Maryland in 1974

Celibacy is a self-surrender for a sublime purpose.

Cor 7:32-33). Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke favorably of those who voluntarily choose celibacy: *“there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it”* (Mt 19:12). These words of Christ are the foundation for the Church’s rule of celibacy for priests.

The Church teaches that both virginity for the sake of the Kingdom and Christian marriage are gifts from the Lord. Both are esteemed by the Church, and the realities they signify are inseparably united and caught up in the mystery of Christ. Periodically, sexual

scandals have brought into question the desirability of celibacy, or even whether it is healthy and normal to forego marriage and sexual relations for a lifetime. These scandals bring to light a grievous misunderstanding of the intent of Jesus Christ to encourage heroic souls to dedicate themselves to his total, unfettered service, so that his work on earth could be accomplished more effectively. Christ intentionally spoke favor-





DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

A pastor and bishop

ably of those who would choose to “be eunuchs” for his sake because their undivided service was desired by him. Christ’s words clearly show that he did not think celibacy was unnatural or beyond the ability of men to maintain, with God’s grace. Christ was emphatic in stressing that intense, all-consuming love for, and service to, him were paramount. He calls his special servants to be supernatural rather than merely natural when he says: “*He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me*” (Mt 10:37; see also Mt 19:29). To question Christ’s call for a life dedicated to him in celibacy is to open one’s self to the warning call of Christ: “*O men of little faith!*” (Lk 12:28). The words of Christ in the Gospels and the experience of the Church since apostolic times speak

of the fruitfulness of the celibate priesthood and the awesome example of men living a life and ministry in imitation of the celibate Christ.

Celibacy has meaning, power, and purpose primarily because of the apostolate. It is a self-surrender for a sublime purpose. The purpose of celibacy, like all forms of asceticism (self-denial for spiritual reasons), is for love, and love alone. To lay down one’s life for his friends (see Jn 15:13) can not only mean the kind of physical death that Jesus voluntarily accepted on the cross, but also the day-by-day death of one’s own desires and will for the sake of others. This is the call of the celibate priest, part of the mystery of his vocation to ministerial service and a glorious gift to God’s people.

(CCC 915-916; 1579-1580, 1618-1620)