

CONSECRATED CELIBACY (1/2)

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Speaking of the «challenge of consecrated chastity», the exhortation «Vita Consecrata» affirms the following: «The consecrated person attests that what many have believed impossible becomes, with the Lord's grace, possible and truly liberating. Yes, in Christ it is possible to love God with all one's heart, putting him above every other love, and thus to love every creature with the freedom of God!» (Vita Consecrata, N° 88). This statement defines the parameters of consecrated celibacy, indicates its source and its ultimate purpose without, however, denying its inherent difficulties in practice.

Even if the expression «consecrated celibacy» does not define completely how the Brother undertakes to live by making his vow of chastity, it offers a good basis for examining the subject in the particular context of the situation of the young professed Brother. The beginnings of apostolic and community life, the constant contact with other people in work and relationships, the inevitable difficulties of the common life, the experience of a certain loneliness, the sometimes overwhelming discovery of friendship or love, all this can give rise to new kinds of questions and lead the young religious to wonder about the rightness of his decision to embrace religious celibacy. Consequently, it would be useful to reflect a little about the gift of self that is made, and to draw up a few criteria for discernment to help the young religious face the reality of his situation. In what follows, we offer a few suggestions how this can be done.

As a point of departure, and to help us stand back a little, I suggest we take the case of Abraham as a model of how a crisis of identity and fatherhood can be solved. The well-known story of «Abraham's sacrifice» can help us to understand what was involved. Even if Abraham was not a religious nor celibate, the text of Gn 22 has still a message for celibate religious.

1. A reading guide for Gn 22

Read Gn 22 carefully with the help of the questions that follow:

1. What is this story all about (cf. v. 1)?
2. How is Abraham's trust shown (v. 5, 8, 14)?
3. Why does the text repeat «your son, your only...» (v. 2, 12, 16)?
4. What differences can be seen between the beginning and the end of the story? What are the main changes?
5. What happens to Isaac in the story? How can this be explained?

plained?

6. Why does Abraham sacrifice a ram (v. 13) and not a lamb (v. and 8)?
7. What images of God are we given in this text? In what way is God present in the midst of this crisis?
8. What does Abraham's «sacrifice» consist in? What trial has he successfully overcome? What has he learnt from this event?
9. Compare the end of this text (v. 15-18) with Gn 12, 13. How is Abraham's «sacrifice» a second call?
10. How does Abraham cope with the loneliness he has to endure? What does this trial teach him?

A few points that need stressing

This text is very rich from the anthropological and symbolic point of view. A careful reading should lead to a fuller understanding of the text regarding the subject which concerns us.

Here are a few suggestions.

– It is a **test**, that is, an assessment of motives, a challenge for reason and faith. It is a test of a hierarchy of values. Verse 1 needs to be kept in mind if we are to understand what this is all about. It is a way of «testing» Abraham.

– **Abraham's trust** (his faith) is unwavering throughout the story: difficulties do not stop him; he just goes on. He seems to be convinced that he was not mistaken in responding to this call from God, and even that he will come out of his trial victorious (cf. v. 5). Note, in this connection, the mention of the 3rd day (v. 4), God's day, the day of the Resurrection.

– The insistence on the only son, his dearly-loved son, is not masochistic. It is intended to emphasise that God asks him to **sacrifice something which is an essential part of himself**.

– The most important change in the story is the **great number of descendants** that God promises Abraham. In spite of appearances, from being the father of one child, Isaac, Abraham will become the father of a race that will cover the earth. This fertility is in sharp contrast with God's request at the beginning of the story.

– Isaac disappears from the story (v. 19). He had been **sacrificed symbolically** by his father. Like any other child, he has a right to his independence. Abraham cannot keep him for himself. He has to give up love that is exclusive and accept a different kind of fatherhood.

– The ram (animal father) sacrificed in the place of the lamb (animal son) draws attention to the change that takes place in Abraham, that is, his new way of understanding father-son relationships. He will exchange physical fatherhood for **spiritual fertility** characterised by a numerous and widely scattered multitude of descendants and the blessing of God. Abraham emerges victorious from the trial in which both his fatherhood and faith were tested.

— In the story, **God changes his appearance**. If, at the beginning, God appears inhuman, by the end he shows that he was very much present during the time of trial. It is God who directs the story, who urges Abraham to act, who provides an animal for the sacrifice, who rewards Abraham's trust and leads him to a new understanding of his

role as father. From a humanly incomprehensible situation, God is able to bring about unexpected fertility and blessings. He makes Abraham share in the fatherhood of God.

– Abraham's **trial** was also one of physical, moral and spiritual **loneliness**. He faces the situation alone, while Isaac remains almost a passive onlooker. Note how, as the story goes on, the characters are reduced from a group of 4 persons (v. 3) to 2 (v. 6), and then to Abraham alone as he comes down from the mountain (v. 19). These successive «disappearances» highlight both his gradual dispossession and the loneliness that accompanies his trial. And yet, in the midst of this loneliness, he discovers that God is at his side as the God of life and as a friend.

– What occurs is a **second call** for Abraham (cf. v. 15), similar to the first. Having left his country (Gn 12), Abraham has now to change the way he is a father. He has to fulfil another role with regard to his son: he has to become truly the father of a new people.

2. Work on the Rule

What is there in Gn 22 that can be used to help us understand consecrated celibacy?

Before you attempt to answer this question, do a little work on the Rule.

• **Read articles 27 to 31 of the Rule** concerning chastity, noting references to:

- consecration
- those concerned by these articles
- community
- demands
- expected benefits
- means to be taken
- God
- Christ
- the Spirit
- Mary

• **Now answer the question**

A careful reading of these articles of the Rule reveals an astonishing degree of agreement with Gn 22:

- celibacy is a response to a call from God, «an expression of love totally vowed to God».
- it is at the same time a trial (the sacrifice) and a blessing (gift of the Spirit).
- it supposes the renunciation of something essential and good, through a desire to «follow Jesus Christ».
- it makes certain demands (control of the senses, reserve), but also produces benefits: personal development, support in educational work, the love for others.
- it makes the Brother share in the fatherhood of God.
- consecrated chastity is a «mystery of death and resurrection, of sacrifice and fruitfulness».
- the universal dimension of love is emphasised, as is the dispossession of self (love freely given and respectful, tenderness for everyone, love at the service of everyone).
- it is a means for furthering the mission: service of others and of God's Kingdom.
- it imposes a certain degree of loneliness in which God reveals himself and the community offers its support.

3. A personal assessment of the practice of celibacy

The aim of the research we have been doing was to enable us to stand back a little and consider the question of consecrated celibacy, and to help us make a personal assessment of how we practise it. The example of Abraham helps us to understand its nature and the articles of the Rule set out the way it should be practised.

At this point, we can go on to the next stage and consider how we practise it in our everyday lives.

The questions that follow cover the essential aspects of certain points and can serve as the basis of personal assessment or community discussions on this subject.

Assessment questionnaire

1. How, in practice, do I make a gift of myself through celibacy? In what sense does it make me happy?
2. How do I understand the expression «love totally vowed to God» (Rule, 27)? How do I put it into practice? What problems and difficulties do I encounter at present in my practice of celibacy? How are they different from those I experienced when I was younger?
3. What «benefits» has my practice of celibacy brought me?
4. In what way is celibacy for me a «blessing» from God?
5. In practice, how do I cope in my personal, community and school life, with the fact that I have renounced fatherhood? How do I cope with my impulses?
6. How has my celibacy helped me to love young people? In what way does it free my heart? How do I control my emotions?
7. On the affective level, what are my expectations regarding the people I meet?
8. What feelings do I experience in my dedication?
9. How do I put my capacity to love at the disposal of everyone, and especially of those who are most neglected?
10. How does my consecration help me to practise my celibacy openly?
11. What part does loneliness play in my life? What value do I place on it?
12. What balance is there between all my various activities? How do I pace myself?
13. How does community life help me to practise celibacy? What expectations do I have?
14. In what way do I renew the gift of myself to the Lord? On what occasions?
15. What aspects of celibacy strike me in particular? Why?
16. With whom do I share my problems, my difficulties and my expectations regarding consecrated celibacy? Who helps me to sort things out?

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