

# *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life*

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## **“EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN”: CELIBATE CHASTITY AND CHRISTIAN LOVE**

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### **Abstract**

*The concepts of counsel and gift in the context of the Evangelical Counsels seem to have nothing in common, because as advisory declaration, a counsel in its face value appears a conflicting notion when compared with the intrinsic features of a gift. On the contrary, in Matthew 19:11-12 Jesus teaches that the Evangelical Counsel of Chastity, though advisory in nature, is a divine gift, for it bears in itself the grace to accept it as a means of attaining greater moral perfection. In reality, greater moral perfection is its principal objective. This explains why Jesus inserts this teaching in a context that some readers would least expect, his teaching on divorce (Matt 19:1-9). Furthermore, he employs the image of a eunuch, which is a natural antithesis in this context, to explain perfect continence. In this paper, the writer studies Matt 19:1-12, with special attention on verses 11-12. The paper focuses on the meaning of “eunuch”, its function in this text of the Scripture, and how Jesus uses it to convey his teaching on the Evangelical Vow of Chastity. Consecrated persons who have accepted and are living the gift of perfect continence are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”.*

### **Introduction**

But he said to them, ‘Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can’ (Matt 19,11-12).<sup>i</sup>

No other premise can be more appropriate for this presentation than these words of Jesus. In them we see the nature and the objective of the evangelical vow of Chastity,<sup>ii</sup> which is not a command but a counsel, proposed by Jesus first of all in his lifestyle and then in his words. When Jesus employed the image of a eunuch to propose this counsel, he expanded further the nature of continence, which can be explained as *to practise self-restraint especially sexually*. According to Jesus, those who embrace this counsel are voluntary eunuchs. It is voluntary because continence for God’s Kingdom is not for personal gratification or self-interest but for a higher value, which is at the core of Jesus’ teaching. This higher value is the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>iii</sup> The phrase “for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven” embodies the purpose of this counsel.

Matthew 19,11-12 came as an answer to the rejoinder of the disciples to Christ’s teaching about divorce in Matt 19,1-12. Their response was “If such is the case with a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (Matt 19,10). This was engendered by Jesus’ insistence on sacredness and indissolubility of marriage, which was sanctified by God when he instituted marriage (Gen 2,24). Jesus saw in this OT

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text an authoritative basis for his explanation and uncompromising assertion on the indissolubility of marriage. The disciples, however, who wanted to seek refuge in what they believed to be a command from Moses, were confronted by Jesus' teaching. A certificate of dismissal was allowed in the OT (cf. Deut 24,1-2) because of human hardheartedness (Matt 19,8).

The reaction of the disciples to this fresh and firm interpretation of God's plan for man necessitated further explanation in which Jesus mentioned three different classes of eunuch. Were the disciples thinking that the condition of eunuchs was preferable to entangling oneself in a union that knows no exit, according to Jesus new teaching? The evangelist does not tell us further reaction of Jesus' interlocutors; his attention now centers on Jesus' response, especially on the three ways of becoming a eunuch. This response is of importance in understanding the state of those who profess the evangelical vow of chastity. They can be identified with the third class of eunuchs: "eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven". Jesus rounded up what he wanted to convey in these words: "Let anyone accept this who can" (Matt 19,12).

From what Jesus said and in relation to the counsel of continence, one can elicit a key phrase or idea. This is voluntariness which is a constitutive quality of this third group of eunuchs: "they made themselves eunuchs". This sets a sharp contrast between them and the preceding two: those who received their state of eunuch from nature and those who have been made so by fellow human beings. In other words, if they have the opportunity of changing what they are, they could willingly do it. The Scripture does not tell us the reason why some men were rendered impotent by others.

In ancient Near East some men were castrated for certain high positions in a royal court. We know from the Acts of the Apostles 8,27 that "there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury". Perhaps he was castrated for this high position in the Ethiopian royal court. Another example is in Esther 2,14 where a eunuch was in charge of the king's concubines. This further differentiates them from the third group because it is only these voluntary eunuchs, according to Jesus, who have reason for being eunuchs. They are eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, this third group of eunuchs can be identified with voluntary or perfect continence. The preceding two classes could remain eunuchs without exercising self-restraint especially sexually (description of eunuch). Thus the inherent self-restraint of eunuchs is imposed on them either by nature or by human beings.

This paper attempts to explain the nature of the evangelical vow of chastity from the perspective of voluntary eunuchs and the relationship between this and Christian love. I shall be working on a triadic outline: the liberating power of the vow of chastity, Christian love and the link between this vow and Christian love.

## **1. Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven**

Jesus' invitation to his disciples to embrace perfect continence is taken as the matrix of this reflection on the life of celibacy and Christian love especially in the NT. In this first section the constituent parts of the words of Jesus in Matt 19,1-12, particularly verses 11-12 are analyzed.

### **1.1 Understanding the Term 'Eunuch'**

While the disciples of Jesus were thinking about the expediency of marriage, Jesus continued the same topic but shifted the conversation from the level of getting married to remaining celibate and eunuch. The Hebrew of the OT uses the term *sārîs* for a eunuch. This is the common word for an emasculated man.<sup>iv</sup> Although in Deut 23,1 the term *sārîs* does not occur,<sup>v</sup> the passage contains a description of the literal meaning of *sārîs*. According to this text, a eunuch was not allowed to participate in the divine worship because he was not complete as a human person. In other words, his blemished body is not 'culturally' pure. The Book of Leviticus forbids the offering of castrated animal (cf. Lev 21,20 and 22,24). Another reason was that as one rendered impotent, a eunuch was incapable of fulfilling the divine command in Gen 1,28: "Be fruitful and multiply".

This physical feature of *sārîs* as one without issues is seen in Isa 56,3-4. Self-depiction of *sārîs*' in this text is "I am just a dry tree". This "was apparently a deprecating remark about their inability to father children".<sup>vi</sup> They were refused admission into the assembly of the Lord (Lev 22,24 and Deut 23,2), because it seemed improper for a person, deprived of the power of transmitting life, to associate with the God of life. Isaiah 56 urges their full readmission among God's people and Wis 3,14 has a blessing reserved for them and confirms their participation in the temple service. In Isaiah the Lord commiserates with the eunuchs on their condition and even encourages them by promising them that thing which either nature or fate denies them.

Besides this literal meaning, the Hebrew term *sārîs* also acquired another connotation. It is predicated of officer and chamberlain.<sup>vii</sup> An example of this is seen in Gen 37,36 and 39,1. Pharaoh's official, Potiphar, who bought Joseph from the Midianites is called *sārîs* in Hebrew. Our English translations, especially the *New Revised Standard Version* and the *New Jerusalem Bible*, seem to be aware of the fact that *sārîs* in this context does not mean eunuch in the literal sense, hence the rendition, "official", in both passages. In the story of Joseph, we are informed that Potiphar was married and probably he had issues. Furthermore, in 1 Chr 28,1 *sārîs* stands for distinguished officials at the royal court.

Jesus, surely, was referring to the literal sense of *sārîs* in his conversation with the disciples. However, was he referring to real mutilation of oneself when he mentioned the third category of eunuchs? Jews at the time of Jesus held in abhorrence castration with which eunuchs were associated, because marriage was considered as a divine mandate. The Biblical basis for this is from the account of the

creation of the primordial parents of mankind who were given the injunction on procreation (Gen 1,28). The command, "Be fruitful and multiply" was upheld as a divine mandate that should be observed to the letter. The Rabbis taught that every Israelite should adhere to this order. In the Rabbinic teaching, "to allow one's twentieth birthday to pass without one's having married, is to break a command and draw down on oneself the anger of God". Another famous saying of the Rabbis in this regard is "one who does not marry is like a person who sheds blood – he refuses to transmit the life within him".<sup>viii</sup> In fact, animals should not be subjected to castration because they are also involved in procreation. According to the Rabbis, marriage was a duty every human person has to fulfill.

In the history of the Rabbinic Judaism, there was once a Rabbi, Ben Azzai, who remained celibate. When other Rabbis criticized him, he responded in a manner many consecrated celibates of our time would answer: "My soul cleaves to the Torah; there is no time for marriage; may the world be maintained by others".<sup>ix</sup> However, Rabbi Ben Azzai did not reject marriage for he was in line with the common teaching of others. He is cited to have said: "He who does not see to the continuation and propagation of the race, may he be accounted by Scripture as if he diminished the (divine) image".<sup>x</sup> Therefore, theoretically, Ben Azzai agreed with his colleagues, but in practice he considered perfect continence paramount to his total dedication to the study of the Torah. His action seems to be akin to what Jesus was proposing to his disciples. Ben Azzai could not have castrated himself and still remained a renowned Rabbi. He was not a eunuch in the literal sense of the term. Therefore, he can conveniently fall into the third category of eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God. He made himself eunuch for the sake of the Torah to which his heart cleaved. Jesus must be referring to this kind of voluntary renunciation of sexual life and marriage of which he was a living exemplar.

### **1.1.1 Newness in Jesus' Invitation to Perfect Continence**

Jesus invited his hearers to the life he was living, perfect continence, for the Kingdom of God in these words: "Let anyone accept this who can". This invitation to perfect continence transcends in the first place the divine command on procreation given in Gen 1,28. However, it does not devalue marriage. Perfect continence means a conscious and voluntary renouncement of that union and all that is connected to it in the full meaning of life and human society.<sup>xi</sup> Christ did not conceal from his disciples the fact that the choice of continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, viewed in the light of temporal categories, is a renunciation.<sup>xii</sup>

While the contemporaries of Jesus were teaching the obligation of adhering to the command in Gen 1,28, and of having family of one's own, he invited his disciples to renounce marriage for a higher value. He did not abolish marriage; rather he affirmed it more than Moses had done. Moses granted some concession but Jesus reminded his disciples of how the Creator intended marriage from the beginning of creation. Therefore, his injunction goes beyond the Mosaic permission of dissolving marriage; this must have made his disciples wonder at his teaching. Already in the

earlier part of the Gospel according Matthew, specifically on the Sermon on the Mount, he proclaims that he has come to perfect the Law and not to abolish it. Matthew 19,1-12, therefore, continues this trend of perfecting the Law.

Jesus' invitation also transcends a certain conception of voluntary eunuchs, which might not be strange to his contemporaries. In Asia Minor, there was a group of voluntary eunuchs called "priest eunuchs" who were practicing self-emasculation for their self-interests. Their major intention was to be like god physically and spiritually. They wanted to transform themselves into the mode of being of the deity. It was cultic self-castration that aimed at mystical union with a certain god. Those who subjected themselves to this mutilation claimed to have attained a new transformation in their lives. Thus they were given some functions to perform in the cultic festivals and they enjoyed public honour and recognition.<sup>xiii</sup> These are voluntary eunuchs; however, they had a motive that was inferior to what Jesus had in mind. Jesus proposed "eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven".

## **1.2 Kingdom of Heaven**

The phrase "Kingdom of Heaven/God" is a major theme in the Bible; it is frequent especially in the Synoptic Gospels. The reason why Jesus called his disciples is "to welcome the Kingdom of God into their lives ... and to put their lives at its service".<sup>xiv</sup> When he debated with the Pharisees and his disciples on the expedience of marriage, he proposed continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 19,1-12). In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is presented as the preacher *par excellence* of the Kingdom of God/Heaven. The Apostolic Letter (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*)<sup>xv</sup> of John Paul II includes the "Proclamation of the Kingdom and Call to Repentance" among the Mysteries of the Rosary. Therefore, the importance of understanding the meaning of the phrase, "the Kingdom of God" is still felt even in our own time.

### **1.2.1 A Linguistic Consideration**

The phrase "Kingdom of God" (*hē basileia tou theou*) is found especially in Mark, Luke and in Acts of the Apostles. Matthew instead prefers a circumlocution, a roundabout expression, "the Kingdom of Heaven" (*hē basileia tōn ouranōn*). Circumlocution is a figure of speech seen often in the Bible.<sup>xvi</sup> It is "so called because more words than are necessary are used to describe anything".<sup>xvii</sup> In Matthew, "the Kingdom of Heaven" is an expression which avoids uttering or writing the Divine Name (YHWH). Hence "the Kingdom of Heaven" in this Gospel is the same as "the Kingdom of God" in the rest of the Synoptic Gospels. The term "Kingdom" as we know is a concrete now; some scholars prefer the abstract noun "reign"; hence one finds in some books, the "Reign of God". In my opinion, multiplicity of terms depends so much on the interpretation given to the original Greek expression *hē basileia tou theou*, "the Kingdom of God". Whether one says the "Kingdom of God" or the "Reign of God", we are still in the same semantic field. Both point to an expression in the Gospels, an expression that is not defined either by Jesus or the Evangelists. It is an expression whose meaning has generated many theological speculations.



### 1.2.2 A Recapitulation of the NT Message on the “Kingdom of God / Heaven”

The meaning of “the Kingdom of God” is central to discipleship.<sup>xviii</sup> In the NT, the following points relate to this important theological theme”:

Kingdom of God / Heaven is a dominant motif in Jesus’ preaching (Matt 4, 17 and Mark 1,14-15). It is a major turning point in salvation history, inaugurated by the arrest of John the Baptist and by the public ministry of Jesus (Mark 1,14-15a; Luke 16,16; cf. Matt 11,12-13). It is close at hand (Matt 3,2; 4,17; 10,7; Mark 1,15; Luke 10, 9.10). It is truly present in germ and now at work (Matt 12,28). Jesus’ wonder-working activity is a sign and an anticipation of the full realization of the Kingdom of God (Matt 11,2-6 and Luke 7, 18-23). It is like a seed, enjoying irresistible power (Matt 18,8. 31-32; Mark 4,8.26-29.30-32 and Luke 13, 18-19). It is like the leaven, unpretentious in its beginnings but destined for enormous growth (Matt 13,33 and Luke 13, 20-21). Repentance and faith are the appropriate human response to the coming of the kingdom (Matt 3,2; 4,17 and Mark 1,15). It is to be approached as a child (Matt 18,1-4; 19,13-14; Mark 10,13-15 and Luke 18,15-17). It is to be sought (Matt 6,33 and Luke 12,31). The Eucharistic meal is an anticipation of the kingdom (Matt 26,29; Mark 14,25 and Luke 22,18). There is a prayer for the coming of the kingdom in its fullness (Matt 6,10 and Luke 11,2). The gospel of the kingdom is to be proclaimed to the whole world (Matt 24, 14; cf. 4,23; 9,35 and 28,19). Jesus’ message is the word of the kingdom (Matt 13,19). There are things that are to be done for the sake of the Kingdom of God (Matt 19,12 and Luke 18,29). The heirs of the kingdom are the poor (Matt 5,3; and Luke 6,20); those who are hungry now (Luke 6, 21), those who are weeping now (Luke 6,21); and the persecuted in the cause of righteous (Matt 5,10). The Kingdom of God is justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14,17). It is the reign of the Messiah (Luke 1,33; cf. Rev 20,4).<sup>xix</sup>

The theme of the “Kingdom of God / Heaven” is indeed vast in the NT especially in the Synoptic Gospels and it covers all parts of these three Gospels. Its use in Pauline writings is rare but very essential. A resemblance of what can be considered a definition<sup>xx</sup> of *hē basileia tou theou*, exists in the NT, in a place that is least expected, in a Pauline letter, because its use in his writings is not as profuse as in the Synoptic Gospels. In Romans 14,17, Paul explains: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. I focus on the second part of this brief definition of an all-encompassing phrase: “the Kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. Three things are involved: righteousness, peace and joy. This is reminiscent of the programmatic passage in

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Luke 4,16-30 which is a quotation from the OT: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4,18-19).

This OT text is from Isaiah 61,1-2 and 58,6 and Jesus uses it to inaugurate the messianic era that has its inception in him. Another passage is: “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1,33). Is “the Kingdom of God” that is so central to the preaching of Jesus separable from the person of Jesus and the Good News he proclaims? Jesus is the king and his coming inaugurates his reign on earth, his kingdom of “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. The words of St. Paul are echoes of Jesus’ description of his mission in Luke 1,18-19; his Kingdom is the reign of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

There is a pre-requisite for being a participant in this Kingdom; it is *metanoia* with all its connotation of “repentance, change of heart, and turning from one’s sins and change of way”. This is the content of Jesus’ first proclamation of God’s Kingdom (cf. Matt 3,2; 4,17; Mark 1,15). The message of the Kingdom of God is central to Jesus’ mission and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God. What then is the nature of this perfect continence for the Kingdom according to Jesus’ teaching?

## **1.3 The Nature of Perfect Continence**

Jesus’ contribution to the debate on divorce recorded in Matt 19 confirms the significance of marriage and at the same time he counsels perpetual continence. He confirms marriage when he emphasized its indissolubility (cf. Matt 19,4-6) as well highlighting its theological character. It is God who joins a man and a woman and makes them one body, “therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt 19,6). The “writ of dismissal” which Moses allowed was necessitated by hardheartedness of his contemporaries and so is not in the original divine plan when God created our primordial parents. In the creation of man and woman, unity is a central feature. In fact, Jesus cited Gen 2,24 to support his own side of argument: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh”.

Besides the confirmation of what the Pharisees and the disciples of Jesus (cf. Matt 19,3) knew, especially from their assiduous study of the Law, Jesus advocated something new. Perhaps, he might have taken them aback for they did not expect the argument to reach this extent. Jesus spoke of making oneself eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is impressive to note the introductory statement before he enunciated the three categories of eunuchs. The preamble reads: “Not everyone can accept this teaching but only those to whom it is given” (v.11). This definitely goes with the three classes of eunuchs according to their sequence. It goes with them as well as forming an inclusion with the last statement of this pericope in v.12: “Let everyone accept this who can”. However, when we come to the level of meaning, it points particularly to the third class of eunuchs because the first two

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categories of eunuchs were well known to his interlocutors. Secondly, the injunction or rather the invitation at the end: "Let anyone accept this who can" (v.12), can only point to the third class. This is because it is only this class of eunuchs that does not encroach on the person's will. The first two are imposed on a person by nature and by other human beings, while the third comes out of a person's will or personal freedom. Therefore, the first two cannot be object of counsel. While the preparatory statement, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given", indicates the vocational feature of perfect continence. The concluding invitation, "Let anyone accept this who can", points at the voluntariness on the part of those called to embrace it. It clearly indicates the importance of personal choice and also the importance of the particular grace, that is, of the gift which human receives to make such a choice.<sup>xxi</sup>

From Jesus' words, three outstanding features of perfect continence can be elicited. The first is that it is a divine gift: "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given" (v.11). The subject of the passive voice, "it is given", is not mentioned. It can be taken as an instance of the *theological passive* which is not infrequent in the Bible. *Theological passive* is that passive sentence whereby God is the subject or agent although he is not explicitly mentioned. It is a name given to the passive used in order to avoid directly naming God as agent.<sup>xxii</sup> Thus one can complete Jesus' words in this way: "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given by God". The gift of perfect continence is a free gift from God. It is given to some, and it is an exceptional gift of grace.<sup>xxiii</sup> This is implied in the phrase, "Not everyone can accept this teaching".

The second feature of perfect continence is from the description of the third category of eunuchs. In Jesus' words, "There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven". While the first two classes are eunuchs out of some constraints, the eunuchs in the third category "have made themselves so". Here lies the crucial point and characteristic of this third category. They voluntarily respond to the divine gift of perfect continence. Nothing impelled them to subject themselves to this state of life.

The third feature of perfect continence, according to Jesus, is derived from the concluding statement in v.12: "Let anyone accept this who can". This is not an imperative mood. Jesus is not giving a command because he knows it is not meant for all but only to those to whom God has given this free gift. Hence the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience are often called "Evangelical Counsel". They are counsels that have their root in Jesus' teachings and lifestyle recorded in the Gospel and in the relationship and experience that his followers had of him. They are counsels because all are not called to take them as vows. "The evangelical basis of consecrated life is to be sought in the special relationship which Jesus, in his earthly life, established with some of his disciples. He called them not only to welcome the Kingdom of God into their lives, but also to put their lives at its service, leaving everything behind and closely imitating his own *way of life*".<sup>xxiv</sup> In these words one notes the echo of the debate in Matt 19 particularly from the side of Jesus. To be a



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eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of God is for some persons. Again, *raison d'être* of this life is the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, it is a life in imitation of Jesus. Hence, at the time of this debate with the Pharisees, the living example of a eunuch for the Kingdom of God was Jesus himself and the invitation addressed to his disciples was to imitate his way of life.

To these three features of celibacy, we can add the constancy of this state of life. Perfect continence by its name is not a short-term affair. Once self-mutilation is made, a person should remain so for life. One does not think of reversal. Jesus had this in mind when he employed the image of eunuchs to convey his teaching on a state of life that sounded alien to the society that believed that marriage was a divine command. Eunuchs from birth or by human beings remain eunuchs for the rest of their lives. In the same way, eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God should remain eunuchs forever. This is implicit in the mere fact of using the image of a eunuch to present this teaching. If not so, Jesus could have resorted to another image.

Faithfulness to this self-mutilation is a great challenge to those who respond to Jesus' invitation, for Jesus was not referring to a physical self-mutilation but a spiritual one. It is the most effective means of dedicating oneself wholeheartedly to the divine service and the works of the apostolate. Since it is not on the mutilation of the physical body, the greatest temptation is to seek for reversal, which is not inherent in the invitation. Therefore, those called should be at pains to be faithful to what they have professed, believing Jesus' words and relying on God's help. They should not rely on their own strength.<sup>xxv</sup> Speaking of those who have consciously chosen celibacy or virginity for the sake of heaven, Christ pointed out – at least in an indirect way – that this choice during the earthly life is joined to renunciation and also to a determined spiritual effort.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The permanence of the state of perfect continence helps to underscore Jesus' teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. He did not negate that marriage was a divine command. Rather, he went further to enlighten his interlocutors on what they thought they knew. Just as no one can separate what God has joined, in the same way, it will be absurd for one who has undergone the kind of self-mutilation Jesus was proposing to look for a return to wholeness. This state should remain perpetual. The sole aim of perfect continence, according to Jesus, is for the sake of the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of God is central to Jesus' mission. What has this do with that love of which Jesus is an epitome?

## **2. Christian Love**

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3,16). The term “love” in the NT is one of the central concepts, which express the whole content of the Christian faith. The key to the understanding of the Christian faith is God's love for us when he sent his Son to the world. Our response to this divine love is also called love in the NT: “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4,16).

## 2.1 Getting to the Root

In Greek the most common verb for 'to love' is *phileō* which indicates a general attraction towards a person or thing. It basically stands for love for one's relatives and friends. A typical expression is *philadelphia* that means "love for a brother", "mutual love" (cf. 2 Pet 1,7). In the ancient Greek language, *phileō* means, to show affection, love, and hospitality, to be accustomed to, to be in the habit of, to do something gladly, customarily, or generally. Matthew 6,5; 23,6 and Luke 20,46 contain this meaning of *phileō*. Matthew 6,5 for instance states: "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward". "Love" in this verse is from *phileō*. Another example of *phileō* as a love for one's relative is found in Matt 10,37: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me". Greek also has another verb, *eraō* from which we have *eros* and the common adjective, *erotic*. It points to love that desires to have or take possession. It fittingly describes love that seeks to get something from the other. The third verb is *agapaō* which in classical Greek means "to welcome, to honour". As a verb for "to love", it is not clearly defined as the preceding two verbs.

The NT has two outstanding words that express love. These are *phileō* and *agapaō*. These are verbs from which other words, particularly compound words are derived. Thus in the NT one can speak of the *agapaō* group and the *phileō* group. It is observed that *phileō* is employed mainly for love of people who are closely related either by blood or by faith. Father-child relationship in John 15,19; 11,36 and 16,27 is expressed with *phileō*. Sometimes it is synonymously used with *agapaō* especially in John 3,35, 5,20 and 21,15. *Agapaō* group is more frequent and it is essential in our understanding of the early Christian communities. It is accorded a particular significance in the NT because it is used to express the love of God, the way of life based on this divine love, and the way of life that flowed from it.

## 2.2 Synoptic Gospels

In the Synoptic Gospels, God's relationship with human beings is expressed as *agape*. His Son who came to redeem us is *ho agapētos* "the beloved". The same term is predicated of those loved by God. We are the "beloved". We shall see this mainly in the Pauline Writings. According to the voice of the Father at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1,11; Matt 3,17; Luke 3,22) and at the Transfiguration (Mark 9,7; Matt 17,15 and Luke 9,35), to listen to Jesus is to be saved. God's love for us of which Jesus is the personification was revealed in Jesus' ministry.

Our response to God's love is based on the two commandments enunciated by Jesus in Matt 22,34-40; Mark 12,28-34 and Luke 10,25-28. It is summarized as love of God and love of neighbour. In loving God and our neighbour we share in the

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earthly ministry of Jesus.<sup>xxvii</sup> This ministry made him to suffer and it did cost him his mortal life. His followers are enjoined to follow his footsteps by also bearing hardship that love entails. They can succeed only by the way of suffering (cf. Matt 10,37-39 and Luke 6,22-26). Agape, according to the Synoptic Gospels, is God's relational attitude to humans and their twofold response to this by loving God and fellow human beings. God's love for us and our love for him and others demand suffering. God-made-man was the first to give a lead to this and we have to follow in his footstep. Both on the part of Jesus and on our part, suffering is an important feature of agape according to the NT; it is selfless love.

In the Synoptic Gospels, agape knows no bounds because our love is not only for those who love us. It is not just that meaning of *phileō* in Classical Greek. Love is agape in its new meaning among the followers of Jesus. Jesus' command is "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your father in heaven" (Matt 5,44-45; cf. Luke 6,27-36). It is a great challenge to love enemies, but agape, according to Jesus' teaching, is pruned in one's love for those who in human reckoning do not deserve love. Jesus demonstrated love for his enemies especially those who crucified him (Luke 23,34; cf. Acts 7,60). The distinguishing mark of Jesus' followers is to love without measure and to love without expecting any reward.<sup>xxviii</sup>

## **2.3 Letters of Saint Paul**

Paul believes that his life is determined by God's love for him (cf. Gal 2,20). In the letters of Paul we find the great hymn of agape in 1 Cor 13 where love is exalted over and above all other virtues. This hymn teaches that other virtues are varied expressions of agape. Actually, the hymn in 1 Cor 13 echoes the concept found in the Synoptic Gospels: the whole Law is summed up in love of God and love of neighbour.<sup>xxix</sup>

It is impressive to note that the triadic part of 1 Cor 13 is centred solely on fraternal love besides the allusion to love for God in v.13.<sup>xxx</sup> The hymn in 1 Cor 13 commences with the supremacy of love in vv.1-3. The works of love in vv.4-7 and finally the never-ending duration of love in vv.8-13 follows this. Love is the only eternal virtue. In the list of the fruits of the Spirit the all-encompassing attribute of love makes it stand in the forefront: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (cf. Gal 5,22-23; Eph 4,2; 4,32-5,2; Col 3,12; 2 Cor 6,6). Agape in Paul's words has no possessiveness and is not a desire for satisfaction. Its desire is to satisfy and edify the other.

Paul, being an expert of the Law and of the entire OT teaching, links his concept of agape to the election of Israel, whence the common expression *agapētos* "the beloved one" in his writings (cf. Rom 1,7; 9,25; 11,28; 12,19; 1 Cor 4,14.17; 15,58; 2 Cor 7,1; 12,19; Eph 1,6; 5,1; Phil 1,12; 2,12; 3,13 etc.). God's love, according to Paul, is the motive for the election of Israel and of the Christians. One who believes in Jesus is a sinner who is loved by God. God's love in a sinner makes him enter into

God's sphere and makes him a loving person capable of loving God and of loving fellow humans. This divine love for us is so strong that nothing can separate us from it (Rom 8,39). The basis of our love for God and for our neighbour is God's love for us. It is God's love that moves us to love (cf. Rom 5,5 and 15,30). The Christian knows, through faith, that God loves him. For this faith to be active one has to love: "The only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal 5,6; cf. 1 Thess 3,6). For Paul, love is the force that holds a Christian community together and builds it up. One can speak of fellowship only where there is love: "Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor 14,1; see also 1 Cor 16,14 and Eph 1,15-16).

## **2.4 Johannine Writings**

According to John, God's nature and activity are clearly illustrated by the use of the term "love". God is essentially love (1 John 4,8). Our love for God and for one another is based on God's love for his Son. God's love for us is made visible when he sent his Son into the world (cf. 1 John 3,1) and we have to be like his Son (1 John 3,16). Love is God's primary purpose for the world. God's love is manifested in his glory and its triumph is seen in Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus' death was the greatest manifestation of his love for us (John 15,13).

The response of human beings to God's love is also our love for God and for our neighbour. Our mutual love is grounded in the love of God (John 13,34 and 1 John 4,21). In the letters of John there is a constant exhortation to love one another (cf. 1 John 3,11.23; 4,7.11.12; 2 John 5). Being children of God is the criterion for loving the brother (cf. 1 John 2,10; 3,10.14; 4,20.21 and 5,2). To love is the same as to observe the Law (John 14,23).

## **2.5 Dialectic on Christian Love**

It is clear from the above investigation in the NT that love among Christians is intrinsically marked by disinterestedness. It is rooted in God because God himself is love. It starts first and foremost with a good disposition towards another and manifests itself in practical things. Jesus in his ministry gave us the example to follow.

When at the time of creation God made us, he desired to make us part of himself. Hence, he created us in his image and likeness. He remains faithful to his love in spite of our unfaithfulness. The climax of his love is the coming of his Son in our human nature who came to show us how to love and to establish his Kingdom of love (John 15,13-14). What Jesus commands us to do is to love. When we love we identify ourselves with him.

No one was exempted from Jesus' love for he came to save all. He is generous with his love like the Father who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt 5,45). God was the first to love us and show us what agape is. Among the contemporaries of Jesus, women and children were not rated equally as men. The evangelists excluded them

from the number of those whom Jesus fed (cf. Matt 14,13-21; Mark 6,32-44; Luke 9,11-17 and John 6,1-15). However, Jesus in his ministry had remarkable openness to them. He was also the friend of sinner and he even called one of them, Levi, to be among his close companions (cf. Matt 9,9; Mark 2,13-14 and Luke 5,27-28). He ate with sinners (Matt 9,10-13; Mark 2,15-17; Luke 5,29-32; 15,1-2; 19,1-10) and loved the Samaritans (cf. Luke 10,25-37). He was indignant to those who were obstructing children from going to him (Mark 10,14). Children's attitude to life is recommended to those who want to enter into the Kingdom of God (Mark 10,15; cf. Matt 18,1-4; Mark 10,13-16 and Luke 18,15-17).

An exceptional novelty in the call to discipleship in the NT, especially in Jesus' earnest attempt to break the social barriers at this time is the conspicuous presence of women among those who followed him. The Evangelist Luke is particularly interested in this newness because he highlights the presence and specific functions of women who were in Jesus' entourage (Mark 15,40-41; Luke 8,1-3; John 4,27). When Jesus went about "proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8,1), gender barrier is breached. He gave value to the worthless. He fulfilled the content of the programmatic passage in Luke 4,18: he let the oppressed go free. Unlike the Rabbis of his time, Jesus admitted women to discipleship.

If God's Kingdom is at the center of Jesus' preaching and love is the visible manifestation of this preaching, the two are inseparable. What Jesus preached was what he did. When he invited his followers to renounce marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God, he was inviting them to a complete self-identification with God who is love. The ultimate aim and goal of all persons is this union with God. Every human being on the face of the earth has an existential thirst for God. Perfect continence or celibacy can be seen as the ultimate expression of this desire to love God now, and to the full capacity of the human heart.<sup>xxxii</sup> Therefore, selfless love and the innate urge for unreserved union with God are at the basis of the state of eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

### **3. Celibacy and Christian Love**

A Eunuch literally means one who is impotent either from birth or emasculated by fellow human being for a purpose. Such a person need not go into marriage because the essence of marriage, according to the contemporaries of Jesus, will not be attained. From our discussion above we have seen that those who are castrated by human beings are made so for some specific reasons. One of such reasons was to acquire a high post in the royal court. We can ask ourselves: why is it necessary that a healthy human being be made eunuch in order to occupy a prestigious post in an earthly and transient kingdom? Why can't a married man be given such a work? Similar question can be asked about eunuchs who were given charge of the king's concubines. No married person can claim to have unhindered devotion to duty. Rabbi Azzai mentioned above knew that family ties would be a hindrance to his love and study of the Torah, thus he opted for perfect continence in order to be free to render wholehearted service to the Lord.



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In all these, we note that perfect continence is preferred because one considers it a value higher than marital status. What gives it this preferential value is the course of the Kingdom of God. The principal reason is to be free to embrace the dictates of perfect continence, which is undivided love for God. Human heart is made to be filled with something, with love. It is designed for love. If the path of celibacy should be trodden successfully, the human heart has to be filled with active love for God and neighbour. Celibacy makes us free to be full. Those who have embraced this state of life should not be free to be empty. When they are empty, they become like emasculated men who grope about wishing to return to wholeness. Celibacy uniquely frees the heart of those who are called to it, so that they become more fervent in love for God and for neighbour.<sup>xxxii</sup> The introduction on celibacy in the Rule of Taizé describes it thus: "While celibacy brings greater opportunities to concern oneself with the things of the Lord, it is acceptable only in order to give oneself more fully to one's neighbour with the love of Christ".<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Besides Matt 19,1-12, another clear reflection on the life and the purpose of celibate life is found in Paul's Letter to the Corinthians 7,32-34. According to Paul, the purpose of celibacy is to dedicate oneself to the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord. A close look at this text shows a twofold division. The first is on a celibate man and a married man and the second is about unmarried woman or virgin and married woman. It is interesting to note the phrase "and his interests are divided" (v.34). This implies that all should care for the affairs of the Lord, whether married or single. The degree of our caring depends on the state of life of each person. The interests of a married man are divided; they are not fully focused like that of a celibate.

The affairs of the Lord are about the reign of God in the world and this reign, God's Kingdom, is characterized by the Christian love. It is the definitive fulfillment of the aspirations of all human beings, to whom Christ addressed his message. God's Kingdom is the fullness of the good that the human heart desires beyond the limits of all that can be his lot in this earthly life. It is the maximum fullness of God's bounty.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Hence celibacy makes one not to have undivided interests. The sole interest is about the affairs of the Lord. It makes one free to be dedicated to the Lord and to the course of the Lord.

Jesus, who invited his disciples to this kind of life, exemplified it in his earthly ministry. He taught us how to be celibate. It is like a coin with two sides and each of these sides is indispensable. The first is union with his Father. He taught us how to commune with the Father especially in prayer and in activities. His occasional withdrawal to a lonely place invigorated him for more active ministry. The other side of it was his unconditional love for all. His celibate life made him love all. It did not keep him aloof from people but made him love people with all the warmth of human love.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Celibacy is an inner energy from which the apostolate is generated. It is a source of power because it makes those who embrace it Christ-like. This entails union with the Father who is love and who loves and wants us to love others as he

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loves us. A consecrated person who neglects this inner aspect of celibacy will certainly experience interior vacuum within him/her. When there is this emptiness, the next step is a mechanical way of living and unfaithfulness to one's commitment.

It is a contradiction for consecrated persons who have vowed to be celibate not to love. When such persons cannot love, it is because they are not full inside. By the term 'full' we mean that their interior life is filled with love of God and neighbour. One can purport to be celibate and has filled his/her heart with worldly things and attachment. One has wrong energy inside him/her and when this energy is invoked it generates wrong actions.

## **Conclusion**

"A life transformed by the evangelical counsels becomes a prophetic and silent witness and at the same time an eloquent protest against an inhuman world. It calls for the promotion of the individual and for a new *creativity of charity*".<sup>xxxvi</sup> "Eunuchs for the Kingdom of God" should not be understood in a literal sense. The first two categories of eunuchs in Matt 19 are literal but the third is indeed metaphorical. Just as the condition of eunuchs affects the social relation of the person by rendering them impotent for life, in the same way being "eunuchs for the Kingdom of God" touches the core of a person's being. This self-mutilation occurs on the spiritual level of the individual. Those who embrace this kind of self-castration are no longer of this world. They should be totally transformed into the image of Christ who has taken the lead and has invited his followers to go after him.

Therefore, consecrated men and women, who freely respond to Jesus' invitation to perfect continence, engage in their varied works of apostolate with their transformed beings. The works of their apostolate are seen as avenues of furthering the Kingdom of God in the present world. God's tender love, which they bear, radiates in all sectors of their work.

No apostolate undertaken by any consecrated person should be underestimated. None is more important than the other or superior to the other. Since Jesus has called them out of this world and they are no longer of this world (John 15,19), the way they value what they do should be different from that of the world. They do not need to have a high post in the world in order to manifest God's love, neither do they have to strive to be important persons before they put into action what they have professed. History of consecrated persons has taught us that those who are vividly remembered today are not the most educated but those who considered themselves insignificant in the sight of the world and according to the reckoning of the world. They are those who were constantly aware of the image of God in their lives and made every effort to live up to it. Their work has an underlying guiding principle, which is God's tender love. Consecrated men and women respond to this invitation to love in and with their lives. Every work of theirs becomes concrete realization of the Christian love and an opportunity of spreading the Kingdom of God. Any deliberate action against Christian love in our work becomes then a form of return to the world from which Jesus has chosen us.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> The citations from the English version of the Bible in this paper are from *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition*, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>ii</sup> In this paper, there are three terms that are used interchangeably; these are “the vow of chastity”, “perfect continence” and “celibacy”. They all refer to the third category of eunuchs mentioned by Jesus in Matt 19,11-12.

<sup>iii</sup> The phrase “the Kingdom of Heaven” found conspicuously in the Gospel according to Matthew is the same as “the Kingdom of God” occurring in the other Synoptic Gospels of Mark and Luke. Matthew prefers to use “the Kingdom of Heaven” because of his tendency to use circumlocution. It is used, among others, when a person or thing is spoken of by some attributes, instead of by its proper simple name (cf. E. W. BULLINGER, *Figures of Speech used in the Bible* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2003] 419). Matthew meticulously adheres to the Jewish usage of not mentioning the Divine name. Word like “heaven” is used instead. Surely this was not strange to Matthew’s addressees or “real readers”.

<sup>iv</sup> B. KEDAR-KOPFSTEIN, “sārîs”, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. X (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990) 344-350.

<sup>v</sup> Note that the Latin version of the Bible, the Vulgate, adds “eunuch” to the text of Deut 23,1: *non intrabit eunuchus, atritis vel amputatis testiculis et absciso veretro, ecclesiam Domini*.

<sup>vi</sup> JOHN D.W. WATTS, *Isaiah 34-36* (Word Biblical Commentary 25; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987) 249

<sup>vii</sup> EDITORIAL STAFF, “Eunuch”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Ketter Publishing House 1996) 959.

<sup>viii</sup> J. SCHNEIDER, “Eunuch”, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* II (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995) 765-766.

<sup>ix</sup> “Ben Azzai”, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2859-ben-azzai](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2859-ben-azzai); accessed on 9 July 2014.

<sup>x</sup> SCHNEIDER, “Eunuch”, 767.

<sup>xi</sup> Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, “The ‘Superiority’ of Continence does not devalue Marriage”, General Audience of April 7,1982, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997) 274

<sup>xii</sup> Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, “The Value of Continence is found in Love”, General Audience of April 21,1982, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997) 281.

<sup>xiii</sup> Cf. SCHNEIDER, “Eunuch”, 765.

<sup>xiv</sup> POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996) 14

<sup>xv</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002.

<sup>xvi</sup> BULLINGER, *Figures of Speech*, 419-422, has some examples of this figure of speech.

<sup>xvii</sup> BULLINGER, *Figures of Speech*, 419.

<sup>xviii</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996) 14.

<sup>xix</sup> Cf. “Pastoral Guide for the Use of the Bible in Preaching”, *The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 1894-1895.

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<sup>xx</sup> Cf. J. FUELLENBACH, *The Kingdom of God: The Central Message of Jesus' Teachings in the Light of the Modern World* (Manila: Logos Publications, 1993) 168-188. The author fully analyzes Paul's definition of the Kingdom of God in Rom 14,17 in the light of the modern world

<sup>xxi</sup> Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, "Virginity or Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom", General Audience of March 10,1982, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997) 263.

<sup>xxii</sup> See further examples in Matt 5,4: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted". Matt 5,6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled". More examples can be found in Matt 3,10; 5,5-9; 5,25.29; 6,7.9.10.33; 7,1.2.19; 10,19.30 etc. We find in all these instances another attempt in Matthew to avoid mentioning the divine name. It reminds one of the expression "Kingdom of Heaven" in Matthew, instead of the "Kingdom of God" seen in other Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>xxiii</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree on the Up-to Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

<sup>xxiv</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 14.

<sup>xxv</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree on the Up-to Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, "The Vocation to Continence in this Earthly Life", General Audience of March 17,1982, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997) 266-267.

<sup>xxvii</sup> M. J. OBIORAH, "Who may abide in your house? (Psalm 15,1): the vertical and horizontal dimensions of worship in Psalm 15", *Bigard Theological Studies - A Journal of Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu* vol. 29 no. 2 (2009) 7-25 Enugu: Bigard Memorial Seminary (ISBN: 978-2396-00-1).

<sup>xxviii</sup> V. M. OKEKE, *The Measure of Love: Lenten Pastoral*. Enugu: SNAAP, 2005.

<sup>xxix</sup> OBIORAH, "Who may abide in your house?"

<sup>xxx</sup> G. D. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987) 625-652.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Cf. J. FUELLENBACH, *Proclaiming his Kingdom* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992) 168.

<sup>xxxii</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree on the Up-to Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> BROTHER ROGER, *The Rule of Taizé, "Celibacy"*, London: Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 2012 ([books.google.com.ng/books?isbn=0281068283](https://books.google.com.ng/books?isbn=0281068283)).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, "The Value of Continence is found in Love", General Audience of April 21,1982, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997) 280.

<sup>xxxv</sup> FUELLENBACH, *Proclaiming his Kingdom*, 172.

<sup>xxxvixxxvixxxvixxxvixxxvixxxvi</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE INSTITUTE OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE: *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewal Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium: Instruction* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002) 33.