

SINGLE BLESSEDNESS & NEW EVANGELIZATION (1 Cor. 7,25-40)

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ABSTRACT

This is the most difficult and the most controversial passage in 1 Corinthians and it has exercised the ingenuity of scholars. There are many different interpretations and none of them is immune to objections.² The obscurity is because we do not have the clear picture of what the Corinthian position was. It is as if we are now reduced to conjecture. In spite of the high degree of uncertainty, it is imperative to develop a hypothesis presenting the Corinthian position otherwise Paul's response will remain unintelligible.

The passage is a direct answer to an inquiry concerning spiritual marriage and single blessedness. This passage can be used to show that those who are called to single blessedness have the right to be included into pastoral plan of the Church. Although they are part and parcel of the people of God, they are often neglected in our various parishes. The paper will examine the above pericope in order to draw out the message of Paul and relate it to new evangelization.

INTRODUCTION

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INTERPRETATION

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² Jerome Murphy O'CONNOR, *1 Corinthians* (Wilmington – Delaware, Michael Glazier, Inc., 1980) 71.

Paul states clearly that he has no command from the Lord concerning virgins. He simply gives his personal opinion. Paul says in view of the impending distress, it is good for those who are single to remain as they are (1 Cor 7,17-24). In vv 27-28 Paul uses the second person singular and addresses only men: if you are bound to a wife, do not seek to be free; if you are free from a wife, do not seek marriage. But to marry is not sinful. However, if men marry, they would have to endure hardship from which Paul would like to spare them. The reasons Paul discourages people from seeking marriage are the present eschatological distress and the greater troubles thereof for those who are married.

Paul calls to mind the nearness of the end and draws from it. Christians must cultivate an attitude of eschatological restraint. The appointed time has grown short. The world as we know it is passing away. Those who have wives should live as though they had none. Those who mourn should live as though they were not mourning; those who rejoice should do as though they were not rejoicing; those who buy should live as though they had nothing. Although Paul's conviction about the shortness of time may have proved erroneous, the passing character of our individual lives recommends restraint. The transient nature of human life recommends restraint. For Paul everyone should focus on winning heaven.

Paul returns to the theme of the married and the unmarried. His statement in v 32 is radical. I want you to be free from anxieties. But he has to explain what he means. In vv 32b-34 the reference to the unmarried man is balanced by that to the husband and that to the unmarried woman and virgin by that to the wife; on the one hand there is a single mind, a complete devotion to the Lord; on the other hand there is a double concern and there are divided interests (the partner and the Lord). In the lengthy sentence of v 35 Paul as it were, excuses himself and stresses his genuine intention, his loving care.

It is very likely that Paul is answering a question posed by the Corinthians. Most notable is Paul's insistence that marriage is not a sin (vv 28 & 36). It seems that Paul was dealing with a situation in which individuals had committed themselves to celibacy in marriage. This is different from the situation envisaged in 7,1-9 where individuals expected normal sexual expression within marriage. The ascetics at Corinth would have been operating on two fronts. On the one hand they tried to persuade married couples to forego sexual relations, while on the other hand, they tried to convince engaged couples to enter into spiritual marriage.

Some members of the community at Corinth informed Paul of their opposition to spiritual marriage and may have gone on to substantiate their point by presenting the difficulties of a particular case. The framework of Paul's response is provided by his two statements: the appointed time has grown very short (v 29) and the form (the social and commercial institutions) of this world is passing away (v 31). These show that Paul believed that the Parousia was imminent (1 Thess 4,13-18) and he assumed the Corinthians to be aware of it too. The Corinthians should not imagine that the realities that make up the fabric of their present lives are going to endure for very long. This is the central thrust of vv 29-31 the individual phrases of

which should not be taken out of this context. Paul is not recommending that husbands should cease to love their wives, nor that they should put on a hypocritical show of sorrow or rejoicing, nor that they stop all commercial activity. His concern is to prepare them for the day when all these will change. He is asking for an attitude of detachment from the things which tend to absorb humanity. It is foolish to give too much importance to the impermanent.

The Corinthians should have the wit not to involve themselves in the complexities of a change of sexual status at a moment when the imminent approach of the end will bring inevitable difficulties (v 26). Paul argues for the retention of *status quo* of each individual – the married should stay married while the single should stay single (vv 27. 39-40). Those in spiritual marriage should maintain their commitment. Paul reacts against any tendency to move from the married to the single state and vice versa (7,1-16). He is not speaking of marriage as such but of marriage within the context of the Corinthian community where feelings were running high. Those who married would certainly come under attack from the ascetics and would have to waste a lot of energy in repulsing worldly troubles (v 28) and worldly affairs (vv 33-34). They would be distracted by matters that are absolutely of no importance. Equally, the newly married would have to give time to pleasing their partners (vv 33-34).

Paul's implicit condemnation of this attitude (the attitude of pleasing one's partner) is one of the most shocking statements in the letter and easily lends itself to misinterpretation. Since he made love the basis of Christian life (1 Cor 13,2). Paul cannot see involvement with another person as a distraction from the affairs of the Lord. The very next chapter highlights the supreme importance of such concern and emphasizes the barren self-deception and the hypocrisy inherent in a commitment to God which does not embody such practical concern for the other. He is thinking here of the total absorption of the newly married and what he is trying to get across (admittedly not very well) is the egocentric character of this attitude. A husband or a wife has his/her first, but not the exclusive, claim on his/her partner's love. One must remain open to others. In serving others with whom one is not emotionally involved one must be conscious of the relationship to God. Paul does not advise hatred of one's partner rather he is being realistic. His argument is that one should focus on the imminent coming of the kingdom and place this above societal status.

It would seem as if Paul glorifies the single state and this appears to be the case in vv 32-35. However, Paul equally said: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free (v 27). Paul is against change of social status given the conditions of things at the moment. His point is that under the present conditions, one would be a fool to be pre-occupied by the impermanent. It is highly likely that the statement *the unmarried man/woman/virgin is anxious about the affairs of the Lord* (vv 32 & 34), which at first sight appears incredibly naïve, is a subtle criticism of the ascetics who were creating all the trouble. If Paul says: I want you to be free from anxieties (v 32), we are not entitled to assume that he approves of the anxiety of the single person, even if this has the Lord as object. The very term suggests a **worried care** which is out of harmony with the peace to which God calls the believers (vv 7-15).

In the last analysis, therefore, it is very hard to accuse Paul of glorifying the single state. It was his own, and he thought it the best (1 Cor 7,7), but he certainly did not make it mandatory for all (v 35). He does in fact invoke his authority in this section but then his motive is to alleviate a burden. He authoritatively states: If you marry you do not sin and if a girl marries she does not sin (v 28); and he applies this judgment to the situation of widows (v 39) but especially to a spiritual marriage in v 36 (where 'his betrothed' is literally 'his virgin'). Even though these have made a vow or promise of celibacy in marriage, if they cannot control their sex-drive they should enter into a normal married relationship without any scruple. It must be noted that Paul is not objecting to a spiritual marriage as such. This is clear from v 37. It may be the will of God for some and so they have Paul's blessing.

In order that his opinion, which he hoped would be for their benefit and the promotion of peace and order (v 35), be given due attention, he reminds them, with extraordinary mildness, that he is the one entrusted by God with the care of the community (v 25), and concludes with the massive understatement: *I think that I have the spirit of God* (v 40).

Parthenoi refers to virgins or unmarried young women betrothed in marriage who together with all the other household members involved (especially the significant males – father and fiancé) who are unsure how to proceed in view of their conversion, spirit-possession and new status as sisters to their Christian brothers. The issue which Paul is dealing with here is: Should unmarried brothers and sisters proceed to marriage in line with the established cultural norms and expectations? Should they remain as sisters and brothers? Paul advises that people should remain as they are. However, if a virgin should marry she does not sin. This is followed by series of arguments in favour of remaining unmarried, arguments which combine Jewish Christian imminent-end eschatology with motifs from Stoic and Cynic teaching on the need for the truly wise person to remain undistracted by worldly attachments and free from care in his or her mission as a messenger of God. The overall thrust of Paul's advice comes at the end: So then he who marries his fiancée does well and he who refrains from marrying will do better.

What is striking about this argument is that while it seeks to promote what will bring benefit and good order (7,35), it is far from being socially conservative since it challenges the injunction of Gen 1,28. What Paul's views express is an underlying idea that exceptional times require exceptional lifestyle. Some of these may appear conventional as with the married who remain married and maintain sexual relations but now with a degree of reciprocity between the sexes unusual for the times. Others will appear unconventional as in the case of apostle who refrains from going accompanied by a wife (9,5) or the widowed who remain single rather than remarrying or the betrothed who do not proceed to marriage but remain unmarried. What is important for Paul however, is neither conventionality nor unconventionality, but wholehearted and responsible commitment to the Lord at the turn of the ages in whatever condition and status believers find themselves. As a corollary, what is important also is resistance to pressures from ascetically minded elite to advocate and adopt only one pattern of life as legitimate. This explains why

the thrust of Paul's instruction overall is in the direction not of reducing options, but of increasing them and by introducing exceptional opinions and qualifications making them more complex, always, however, within a framework of divine calling and eschatological hope.

There is lacking what one might call systematic theology of singleness blessedness. In this passage Paul endorses single blessedness as a status in social life. He is introducing something that is new in the mentality and culture of the Corinthians and perhaps to us too. Paul encourages the Corinthians to act both freely and responsibly in this regard..

SINGLE BLESSEDNESS AND SOCIETY

In Africa much premium is placed on marriage and this does not make it easy for singles. A single in African setting is looked upon as a failure, a misfit as if such a person were cursed. Such a person is looked down in society. S/he is an object of scorn and derision. Singles feel insecure. They often face pressures from family, from friends, age group and so forth. However, singles must know that they have not committed any sin by being single. They need not succumb to society pressures. Singles should not enter into marriage because they must get married by hook or by crook. They should be involved in a relationship that gives meaning to their lives. Human relationship is rooted in the Trinitarian nature of God. God is the author, the source, the beginning and the end of relationship. Interpersonal relationship is intrinsic to our human nature. From the beginning God said: it is not good for man to be alone (Gen 2,18). David and Jonathan were great friends. Their friendship is portrayed as so intimate that some homosexuals quote the following passages to endorse their act (1 Sam 18,1-3; 2 Sam 1,26). Israelites did not tolerate homosexuality and so the above texts cannot be used as a licence to justify the practice of homosexuality today.

In some cases there is selfish love and not selfless love. In cases where eros initiated love relationship, the persons involved must go above the eros. Egg may lead one into the seminary but one does not need to remain there. Odour of delicious stew may do this but one does not need to remain at this level. Pick-up Van led Bishop Kukah's mother to suggest priesthood to him. Attraction may lead to the beginning of a relationship, eros may lead to the beginning of relationship but people should not remain at this level.

According to Blaise Pascal, *To be is to be in relationship*. Relationship sums up the essence of our being, since to be is to be in relationship. This is the reason no one is an Island unto himself. In Christ, God entered into a loving relationship with humanity. Jesus broke boundaries in his relationship. He related with Zacchaeus a public sinner (Luke 19,1-10). He stretched out his hand and touched a leper (Mark 1,40-45). He did not condemn a prostitute caught in the act of adultery (John 7,53-8,1-11) and so forth. Jesus never married but he begot children spiritually.

There are different levels of relationships. We do not relate equally with everyone. We are intimate with some people and with others we relate

professionally or formally and yet with some others we are casual. Some are so dear to us that we can give our lives for them.

Marriage is not necessary for a relationship. Family life is not necessary for a relationship. Sex is not necessary in a relationship. However, communication is necessary in any true relationship. At the heart of every relationship is communication. Women pay more attention to details while men tend to summarise. Acknowledge the differences in gender: recognising and acknowledging of the difference in gender make-up and perception will enhance human relationship. Understanding the other enhances meaningful relationship. Communication has to do with the meeting of hearts. The goal of communication is self-disclosure and in this one equally discloses one's agenda. Communication involves speaking and listening.

One needs to accept oneself and appreciate oneself. Lack of self-esteem leads to inferiority complex. It often leads to comparing oneself with others and wondering why God did not create one like this another person. A healthy dose of self-esteem is necessary for a good relationship. There is a thin line between self-esteem and pride. It is not good to feel inferior because one is single. It is better not to be married than to be married and be unhappy all one's life. There are those who are married and they are feeling: I would have been happier without a life partner.

There is need for sincerity and trust. Augustine once said: I have met many who would like to deceive but I have not met any who would like to be deceived. Sincerity, honesty and trust are key ingredients for any meaningful relationship. Falsehood, deceit, lies, dishonesty are obstacles to any true and significant relationship. Those in relationship should learn to trust and trust should develop over a period of time. Betrayal can weaken and in fact can destroy great relationships. Love and understanding are necessary ingredients in any relationship. The great commandment of love is very important if any meaningful relationship is to last (Matt 22,34-40; Gal 5,14; Rom 13,8; 1 Cor 13,4-7)

Mutual Care: There is need for mutual care and consideration if your relationship is to last. It is not a 50/50 affair but there should be fundamental goodwill. I recall a friend of mine in London, Mrs Lorraine complaining about her husband Edward and at the end Lorraine said concerning Edward: *I know he means well*. I told her: This summarises all your complaints. Once you are aware of the fact that Edward means well for you, every other thing fall into place.

FACTORS THAT INHIBIT ENDURING RELATIONSHIP

- 1) *Selfishness*: When someone is always looking for his/her own good neglecting the other, the other will not feel cared for. There should be some willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the other person.
- 2) *Betrayal*: *If an enemy had done this I could have borne it. But it is you my bosom friend. How close was the friendship between us (Ps 54)?* Caesar received so many stabs but he did not die. However as soon as Brutus, his bosom friend stabbed him: his last words were: *Et tu Brute* (Even you Brutus) and Caesar collapsed

and died. Betrayal can destroy and has destroyed a lot of valuable relationships.

- 3) *Lack of Commitment*: This can stifle relationship. Commitment has to do with loyalty and fidelity to one's relationship, to one's friends, family members, business colleagues and fellow Church members. Often times commitment is sacrificed when it gets into the way of self-fulfilment, comfort, pleasure, and personal advancement.

SINGLE BLESSEDNESS & NEW EVANGELISATION

This is a favourable time in the life of the Church. As priests and religious, we are called to live this Year of Consecrated Life intensely and to offer our contribution. Priests and religious blaze new trails and are at the forefront of ecclesial renewal. At this time the Church wants to be a sign of tenderness, compassion and mercy. She wants to build herself starting from the poorest and the weakest of her members. The relationship between the Church and culture is also being redefined. It is not just a matter of reaching out (unilaterally) to this culture but of interacting with it, getting to the core of the problems of men and women today with evangelical and charismatic resources. It is a matter of promoting true humanity, showing the power of the Gospel. In this light, the singles must not be neglected. In this passage, Paul makes it clear that being single or getting married is not what matters, rather what matters is winning heaven.

The Extraordinary Synod on the family revived a method of facing problems noting that true dialogue is needed. True dialogue is without hypocrisy. It is based on authentic listening, sincerity and discernment. It is not afraid of differences in positions and it is able to endure difficult moments. Responding to problems requires time, everyone's contribution, the implementation of sound processes, prayer and a collaborative spirit. It is also important to recognize the good signs already present in the life of the Church. Basically, seeing the road to follow is a gift of the Spirit. It is also necessary for everyone to take part in this process.

The whole Church awaits eagerly for the Synod on the family which comes up this October. The coming synod will have to deal with the following issues – Holy Communion to divorced but remarried; matters relating to cohabitation, homosexual unions, family models and the like. But this must take place within a broader framework that takes into account cultural evolutions. The concept of family is changing, and, what is more, there are various family models that come from the different contexts. There is also a tendency to challenge the very meaning of the family for society, as if it were possible to envision a society that no longer revolves around it. It will be good if the coming synod on the family equally addresses the issue of singles who are often neglected.

The pastoral perspective, which is at the heart of the Synod, must be preserved. We are going back to the spirit of the Council, where John XXIII (at the opening of the Vatican Council II) spoke of an "eminently pastoral" magisterium or where Paul VI (at the end of the Vatican Council II) explained that the spirituality of the Council

had been that of the Good Samaritan. Pope Francis encourages an image of a Church that is open and not afraid of encountering the weak, the marginalized and the neglected. He wants a Church that keeps its doors open and knows how to accompany the weak and the needy (*Evangelii Gaudium* 47). Such a Church is emerging, a Church which engages in discernment, *lives* in our time, from within the situations of life, *listening* to the heartbeats and *smelling* the atmosphere. Such a Church cannot continue to neglect the singles.

The theme of the family challenges us to re-write all the chapters of pastoral care, to deepen the relational dimension of pastoral care, to think of pastoral care in terms of offering support and accompaniment, paying special attention to the weak and the neglected and creating networks of relationships. Briefly, it is about a new way of being Church. Within this framework, the singles can no longer be left out. The widows should not be left out. The divorced but remarried are still members of the Church in spite of their irregular situation. They deserve some pastoral care from the Church.

It is necessary to promote reciprocity and co-responsibility among priests, religious and laity. The journey will be easier if we join forces and face the challenges together, for the mission, and a mission that is decentralized (on everyone's life and on the action of God who is at work in everyone's heart).

CONCLUSION

Parishes should have programmes which bring together all the singles. There is a Latin adage which says: *Pares cum paribus facillime congregunt* (birds of the same feather flock together). People with similar interests, educational background, social status, religious affiliation and so forth are likely to have fruitful and understanding relationships. It is the same with people with similar character and personality traits as well as status who tend to develop a better understanding of one another. Such will not only enable them to share their problems (problems shared are half solved), but will equally enable them to meet and chart ways to new relationships some of which sometimes lead to marriage. In our parishes we have CWO, CMO, the Youth programmes but there is none for the singles. It is high time the Church carried out inculturation in this area and paid pastoral attention to many of them in our various parishes and other places of assignment.