

I have been thinking long and hard on how we can form seminarians and religious for a chaste life as celibates. In this article I want to suggest what might be a fresh starting point for a program of formation for a chaste life. Although my focus here is on celibate chastity, what I am suggesting may have relevance for Christian formation in general.

The sexual revolution that began in the 1960s in the developed world has changed our cultural background beyond the imagining of our predecessors. Movies, television and other media took more and more liberties in using sexually explicit language and activity. The advertisement industry exploited this growing freedom to the point that many of the ads now seen by everyone, children included, would have been taboo fifty years ago. The women's liberation and gay rights' movements have transformed the culture of the developed world and, indeed, much of the rest of the world as well. The internet has made it possible to download sexually explicit material in the privacy of one's room or office anywhere in the world. In movies and television, often enough, it is taken for granted that falling in love leads directly to intercourse. According to the Guttmacher Institute, in the U.S. 70% of teenagers have intercourse before they reach the age of 19 (*The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 20, 2011, p. 41). In our culture there is no longer a generally accepted moral consensus on what is acceptable sexual behavior. Everyone is affected by these cultural changes.

In addition, the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church has made celibate chastity questionable as an honorable enterprise and eroded much of the moral authority the Church had with regard to its teaching on sexual morality. As stories of such abuse continue to appear in different countries, this crisis has long ceased to be dismissed as an "American problem." Indeed, as more and more instances of sexual abuse in other hallowed institutions such as the Boy Scouts, sports programs and schools hit the news, it can no longer be dismissed by the larger society as a "Roman Catholic problem," or even a "problem of a celibate priesthood." We are faced with a worldwide crisis of how to form our children and young adults into mature sexual human beings.

Let me highlight the four last words, *mature sexual human beings*. This is really what I am concerned about in this article.

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A STARTING POINT FOR FORMATION TOWARD CELIBATE CHASTITY

Everything in the universe is an image of God. So a good starting point for a discussion of sexuality might well be to ask how sexuality mirrors God.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

As I began thinking about this topic, I went for a long walk and asked God to help me to know how to proceed. My first thoughts focused on the fact that God created us in his image and likeness. “Does this tell us anything about sexuality?” I asked. It seems that it does and that it gives us a better starting place for talking about sexuality.

Usually, conversation about sexuality starts with sex differences. In my walk I said to God: “What if we started with the question of what sexuality in itself reveals about you?” After all, in creating the universe God has no other model than self to follow. Everything in the universe is an image of God. So a good starting point for a discussion of sexuality might well be to ask how sexuality mirrors God. In the first chapter of Genesis we read, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Clearly sex differences were in the mind of the final author of this section of Genesis, but the most important fact he underlined is that human beings are created in the image of God, including the fact that they are male and female.

One immediate conclusion, then, is that sexuality is not foreign to God, however strange that might seem. Sexuality in humans, other animals, birds and insects somehow reflects God. How? The obvious answer is that sexuality leads to procreation. God is fecund in creation, and he communicates this fecundity to creatures in the form of sexual differences that lead to procreation. Included in this gift of sexuality, however, is sexual attraction or desire that cannot lead to procreation, and here is where the image of God gets mysterious and quite interesting.

In humans, at least, sexual attraction is not, in all cases, tied to procreation. Married men and women are sexually attracted to one another even when procreation is not possible, such as during a woman’s ovulation period before menopause and all the time after menopause. Children have some sexual attraction to their mothers and fathers, and mothers and fathers have been known to have some sexual attraction to

their little children. Before puberty boys and girls are sexually attracted to others. I can remember being attracted to an older female cousin when I was still a child, before I was ten; though I could not have said this at the time, this attraction had some erotic and sexual overtones. Moreover, through no choice of their own some adults find themselves sexually attracted to young children or to teenagers; some adult men and women, through no choice of their own, find themselves attracted to peers of their own gender. Finally sexual attraction plays a part in the attraction to God for many people, both past and present (cf. Burrus 2004). How do we explain sexual attraction that is not tied to procreation as saying something about the nature of God?

Perhaps we can learn something from the emerging field of the theology of eros. In this field the study of sexuality starts from desire, not sexuality itself. Scholars in this growing field take issue with the influential thesis of Anders Nygren, who believed that “the essentially Christian concept of love, or agape, originally had no more to do with the essentially Platonic or Greek concept of desire, or eros, than it did, in his view, with the essentially Jewish concept of law” (cited in Burrus, 2006, xiii-xiv).

The usual theories of eros start with the notion of lack, presupposing that eros wants what it does not have. A child sees another child asking for a toy and wants the same toy. So desire, eros, begins with a perceived lack. On this presupposition, I presume, Nygren and others posit that eros cannot be predicated of God, who lacks nothing.

But does this presupposition fit the reality of biblical revelation? The first chapter of Genesis tells the story of God creating joyously and lavishly; six times we read, “God saw that it was good.” Finally, after creating human beings in the divine image, we read, “God saw that it was very good.” Chapter two of Genesis tells a different story of creation in which God creates a garden of enormous bounty that the man and woman are given to tend and to enjoy. In these stories everything exists because God desires it into existence; and everything we are and have is, therefore, gift. From this perspective we start with God’s

desire (eros) which arises from fullness, not lack, and which leads to the existence of our universe and everything in it. In other words, God's creative desire results in gifts abounding, a world that lacks nothing. No doubt we do desire things that we lack. But this is not how God desires, and we are made in the image of God. So it is not necessary to reduce desire to lack. Perhaps we need to let God wean us from this kind of desiring so that we grow into desiring as God desires. The theologian Mario Costa writes: "From the perspective of the divine, it is God's desire that prompts the giving of gifts. God's desire is (pro)creative, but not in the imposition of God's will upon the creation..., but in luring the creation into relationship through the giving of gifts" (61).

So we might start our formation program for mature sexual human beings by focusing on God's eros, the desire that creates in order to lure us, through lavish gift-giving, into a relationship of love. God is not a despot who forces creation to conform to his dream, but a lover who desires a world of creatures who embrace that dream as freely as they can. God is the God of possibilities, of choices, not a God of necessities. One of the translations of YHWH, the divine name God shares with Moses at the burning bush, is "I will be what I will be" (Exodus 3:14). In this reading God's eros creates possibilities, possibilities that creation can try to thwart or subvert. By creating the world as it is, God becomes vulnerable to creation, needing the cooperation of what is created in order to attain what he intends. God must allure us, must attract us in order to bring about what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Attraction, then, becomes God's way of creating, sustaining and moving the universe toward the divine intention. This way of thinking puts eros at the heart of reality because it is at the heart of God's creative intention. With this line of thought we can rescue the word "lover" from its modern connotation of the illicit. God is lover *par excellence*, and thereby we are all invited to become lovers in God's image.

This starting point places eros and sexuality in a positive light from the start. Our eros is but a pale reflection of

the divine eros that brought us into being for a relationship of friendship and love. From the start we would be focusing on the God revealed in the Bible, not on a philosophical notion of God. The God of the Bible is not the Unmoved Mover, but a God of passion and fire who loves creation madly. God takes a great risk in creating our universe, a universe of chance and probabilities, of choice and free will. The Bible tells the story of that risk and of the great price God is prepared to pay in order to lure us into a relationship of friendship and cooperation. God asks us to join in this risk, to live as divine images. Part of that risk requires that we learn how to be images of God precisely as sexual human beings.

God's desire for us creates in us a reciprocal desire for God, a great longing that, Augustine said, leaves us restless until we rest in him. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis notes that every so often we are overcome by a feeling of enormous well-being and a desire for "we know not what." This desire is what he calls joy, and he describes it in other writings as more satisfying than the fulfillment of any other desire, even though this desire cannot be fully satisfied this side of death. Such experiences of "joy" are, I believe, experiences of God's ongoing desire for us that creates and sustains us; they evoke in us a reciprocal desire for God.

Here is an example of the welling up of such a desire in an ordinary experience, one that any teen-ager might have. In his autobiographical memoir, *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner recalls an experience he had in Bermuda where his mother had taken him and his brother after his father's tragic suicide. At thirteen, near the end of his stay, he was sitting with a girl of thirteen on a wall watching ferries come and go. Quite innocently, he says:

Our bare knees happened to touch for a moment, and in that moment I was filled with such a sweet panic and anguish of longing for I had no idea what, that I knew my life could never be complete until I found it. . . . It was the upward-reaching and fathomlessly hungering, heart-

breaking love for the beauty of the world at its most beautiful, and, beyond that, for that beauty east of the sun and west of the moon which is past the reach of all but our most desperate desiring and is finally the beauty of Beauty itself, of Being itself and what lies at the heart of Being (52).

Buechner himself notes that there are many ways of looking at this experience. He recognizes the possibilities of psychological and sexual influences. He goes on to say, however, that "looking back at those distant years I choose not to deny, either, the compelling sense of an unseen giver and a series of hidden gifts as not only another part of their reality, but the deepest part of all" (p. 52). Note that the experience has erotic and sexual overtones, but that at bottom Buechner interprets it as God's way of attracting him.

So I propose that we start a formation program for mature sexual human beings with God's creative and sustaining eros and our own eros for God. God wants us, wants our friendship and our cooperation. And he makes us capable of that friendship by creating us in his own image and likeness. Desire, with its erotic and sexual components, lies at the heart of creation. Hence, the question is not, "how do we control our erotic and sexual impulses?" but "how do we let God lead us to desire and to love as he desires and loves?"

GOD'S ALLURE

Our attractions to worldly beauty, including people, may be God's way of drawing us to himself. At least this is the message I draw from Karmen MacKendrick's article "Carthage Didn't Burn Hot Enough: Saint Augustine's Divine Seduction." She notes that seduction is not the same as coercion. If I want to seduce you, I try to convince you by my ways of acting that you really want what I want; in other words, seduction aims at a mutuality of desire. Moreover, if I have to seduce you, I recognize that there are other possibilities for you; hence, if I want to draw you to me, I have to woo you away

from those other possibilities. MacKendrick shows that Augustine sees God as seducer. And God seduces by the beauty of the world. God wants us to be attracted by the beauty of the world so that we can be drawn to the ever-greater beauty of God. This drawing God accomplishes not by turning us away from the worldly beauty, nor by hinting that we ought to look for the Creator, nor by simply representing the Creator. "Rather, the world can lead us into its own beauties and please us there, or it can turn us constantly toward the further seduction at which it always hints—a seduction already there, a different, more mysterious manner of enjoyment" (p. 211). In MacKendrick's reading of Augustine God wants us to be seduced by the beauty of the world; if we are not attracted by its beauty, we will never be attracted by God's. Augustine found the world very attractive indeed and continued to find it so even after his conversion. But this beauty, he found, produced in him something much deeper and more intense: the desire for the unnamable and mysterious Other we call God. The desire for worldly beauties could for a time be satisfied, but the desire returned. The desire for God was never satisfied, but it was more satisfying than the satisfaction of any other desire. This desire is, I believe, what MacKendrick refers to with the words "a different, more mysterious manner of enjoyment."

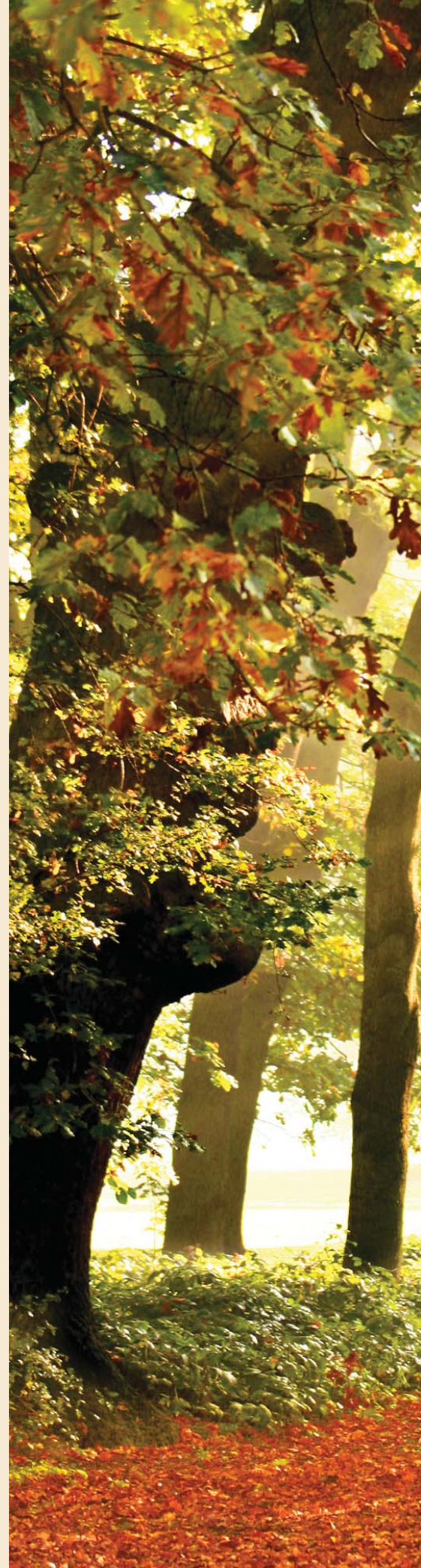
Augustine found himself strongly attracted by the beauty of the world, but in the process of yielding to this world's attractions he found something else, a desire for he knew not what which he ultimately named God, a desire that was extremely intense and even painful, but nonetheless so powerful that he could not ultimately be satisfied by any other beauty. The path to this deeper desire is not reason, nor finding that the beauties of this world are really nothing. Rather, suggests MacKendrick, the path is seduction, namely "that the turn toward God is an attempt to sustain the seductiveness of the world rather than allowing desire to be stopped and satisfied in worldly beauty" (p. 211). In other words, worldly beauty, including the beauty of other persons,

should never lose its attractiveness; it always remains God's means of seducing us. After all, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). We must never forget this and must take it seriously in our formation of men and women for celibate chastity.

I have been wondering why this "unfulfilled" desire for God creates such happiness that C. S. Lewis could call the desire "joy" and say that, even though unfulfilled in this life, it is more fulfilling than the fulfillment of any other desire. I have met many people who have experienced such joy, even ecstasy, in the sensed presence of God. The experience does not last long, but it is deeply fulfilling and leaves people feeling that they have experienced something of heavenly bliss. Why can we not say that at such times we get inklings of the truth that everything is one in God's love, and that, therefore, there is literally nothing to fear, even death? The truth of things is that we exist in God, and nothing exists apart from God. The Wisdom of Solomon says to God: "For you love things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it. . . . You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living" (Wisdom 11:24-26). In other words, at all times we are in God's loving presence, even if most of the time we are not aware of this reality. When we do become aware of it, we faint for joy. And the beauty of this world often is the way to this awareness.

HOW DO WE LET GOD LEAD US?

If what I have written so far is valid, then at every moment of existence God is drawing every one of us toward union, union with God, with one another and with the whole of creation, and this drawing is erotic and even sexual. Thus, as I noted at the beginning, Christian formation for every person might start with this presupposition. So now we come to the issue of formation for celibate chastity. Here, I would say that religious need to be convinced that God wants them to become religious, and Roman Catholic seminarians that God





wants them to be unmarried priests in the Latin Rite, and that this desire of God is for their happiness and consolation. If celibate chastity is to be embraced, it has to be seen as a good thing that God desires for me. Hence, spiritual directors and vocation personnel need to do everything they can to help people who enter seminaries and religious congregations realize that it is God's desire for them that ultimately matters. Discerning God's desire requires that they be willing to pay attention to the movements of their hearts and minds; these movements are God's privileged way of revealing his desire. Among these movements are erotic and sexual attractions. These, too, require attention and discernment in prayer and reflection. Learning to pay attention to these movements is a life-long process.

This learning to pay attention is immensely helped by being honest with God about sexual and erotic feelings, fantasies and desires. Only God can lead anyone toward a mature celibate chastity. But to engage honestly with God about these matters, finding a trusted spiritual director is a necessity. In other words, formation for celibate chastity must begin with convincing young religious and Latin Rite seminarians that honesty with God and with a spiritual director is the best policy for them. However, they will only entrust themselves in this way if they trust that the spiritual director is only interested in God's desire and their real good. Such trust does not come easily, but if the formation program is to work, this trust must be earned by spiritual directors. The latter presumption puts a great onus on bishops and major superiors to choose as spiritual directors men and women whom the seminarians and religious can really trust.

Bishops and major superiors will have to make sure that those appointed to positions of leadership and spiritual direction have developed into men and women of some ease with their own sexuality and know how their own attractions have led them to such ease and to a deeper relationship with Jesus. We might want to find out how the spiritual directors we appoint or suggest to our young people deal with sexuality in

spiritual direction. Too often young people have tried to speak of sexual issues with a spiritual director and were turned off by the embarrassment or reticence of the director and/or by his or her immediate reversion to issues of morality. Trust is easily bruised by insensitivity on the part of the one who is trusted, and it is not easily regained.

In my article "Telling God the Truth about Our Sexuality" (**HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**, Winter 2010), I sketched some further points on speaking honestly with God about sexuality, thereby giving God a better chance of educating us toward becoming more mature sexual images of God. I hope that we can continue this conversation so crucial not only for the formation of mature priests and religious, but also for the formation of mature human beings.

RECOMMENDED READING

Barry, W. A. "Telling God the Truth About Our Sexuality." **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**, Winter 2010, 44-48.

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Costa, M. "For the Love of God: The Death of Desire and the Gift of Life," *ibid.*

MacKendrick, K. "Carthage Didn't Burn Hot Enough: Saint Augustine's Divine Seduction," *ibid.*



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