

## D. Continenence for the Kingdom

### *The Dawning of the Kingdom*

God created human beings as male and female. This wasn't so that we could marry and have children. That happens to be just one way in which we live out the maleness and femaleness of the human body. But marriage and procreation are for this life only. The maleness and the femaleness of the human body carry through into eternal life. Maleness and femaleness are fundamental to who we are as human beings, and nothing that is fundamental to who we are as human beings is lost in the resurrection. In fact, not only do maleness and femaleness carry through into eternal life, but they are brought to completion and perfection. In the resurrection, the maleness and the femaleness of the human body attain their absolute and eternal state.

This means that our maleness and femaleness as human beings has some meaning or purpose that goes beyond marriage and procreation. And the Theology of the Body says Yes, that is correct. He created us male and female because this is the Creator's chosen way of inscribing the "spousal meaning" into the human body. He created us male and female so that the meaning of our existence was self evident in the human body – that we are created for our own sake, yes, but that we find our fulfilment in self-gift. This is true whether we are talking about this life or about eternal life. We find our fulfilment in our bodily self-gift. In this life marriage is a particular way of finding fulfilment in self-gift, one way of living the "spousal meaning" of the body. But it is provisional. In the resurrection maleness and femaleness are transfigured and reach their perfect state. This means that the "spousal meaning" of the human body attains its ultimate expression in the resurrection and in eternal life. (TB 75). And as we saw in the previous cycle, the "spousal meaning" of the human body is lived out in eternity in the mutual self-giving between Man and his Creator.

In this life it appears that some people are called to forego marriage and procreation and to embrace instead the celibate vocation. Does this mean that they forsake their maleness and femaleness? The answer is No. Maleness and femaleness continue to be fundamental to who we are as human beings whether we marry and procreate or whether we don't. And not only do they continue to be fundamental to who we are. As in the resurrection, so also in the celibate life, maleness and femaleness continue to serve their real meaning and purpose: to announce, to proclaim the "spousal meaning" of the body; to announce, to proclaim that the human person finds his or her fulfilment in a total and permanent act of bodily self-gift. For the married man or woman this fulfilment is found in the mutual self-giving of marriage. For the celibate man or woman this fulfilment is found in the mutual self-giving between self and God, just as it will be in eternity.

For this reason the vocation to celibacy, the vocation to continence, appears as an anticipation of the resurrection, an anticipation of the other world, an anticipation of eternal life in which the "spousal meaning" of the human body will be lived out in the perfect and total self-giving between the God and Man. Response to the call to continence reveals what John Paul calls a "particular sensibility of the human spirit that seems to anticipate the future resurrection". (TB 73). Life without marriage is essentially proper to the resurrection and to life in the "other world". But it seems

there are men and women who are called, even in this world, to a life without marriage in anticipation of the future resurrection.

Catholic tradition refers to the celibate vocation, the call to perpetual continence, as an “eschatological sign” (eg *Lumen Gentium* 44; eg *Perfectae Caritatis* 12), a sign that points forwards to the *eschaton*, the end of time and the final consummation of the world when this world passes away and God becomes all-in-all. Men and women who have embraced the vocation to perpetual continence are a sign in themselves and a sign to the rest of the world of the world to come. They proclaim with their continence that in the “other world” of the resurrection “they will take neither husband nor wife” because God will be “all in all”. They proclaim with their perpetual continence that the “absolute and eternal spousal meaning of the body” will be seen in the glorified human body, that the human body is ultimately for union with God himself. (TB 75). This is what is meant when we say that the vocation to perpetual continence is an “eschatological sign”, a sign of the *eschaton* and the final consummation.

But in talking of an “eschatological sign” the Theology of the Body is being even more explicit than this. It refers to continence as a “charismatic sign”, a charismatic sign of the “other world”, and in doing so the Theology of the Body emphasizes the all important truth that the initiative for this vocation comes from God. This is not men and women coming up with a sign from their own initiative and of their own invention. The vocation to perpetual continence is God’s initiative. It’s God’s chosen way, working through a particular set of human beings, of proclaiming to the world the way things will be in the resurrection and in eternal life. It’s God’s chosen way of proclaiming the coming of the kingdom.

But there’s something else. It’s also God’s power at work in these men and women to strengthen them and to sanctify them in their continence, to elevate them in their bodiliness towards the perfect state of the resurrection, to begin already to transfigure them in their maleness and femaleness, and to move towards the perfect realisation of the “spousal meaning” of the human body. In other words this charismatic sign of the “other world”, the vocation to perpetual continence, reveals the power of the resurrection working already in human bodies towards the perfect realisation of the “spousal meaning”. The absolute and eternal “spousal meaning” of the body is already beginning to become a reality in the man or woman who accepts God’s call to perpetual continence.

So when the Theology of the Body talks about perpetual continence as an “anticipation” of the “other world”, an “anticipation” of the resurrection, I don’t think it means “anticipation” in the sense of men and women jumping the gun, and in some sense pretending that they are already in the “other world”. The initiative for this vocation comes not from Man but from God. Nor does “anticipation” here mean that God calls men and women to live in perpetual continence as a way of merely illustrating here and now what it will be like in the “other world” where men and women do not marry. No, it’s an anticipation of the “other world” in the true sense. In these men and women called to perpetual continence, what we’re seeing is the reality of the “other world” already breaking into this world. You could almost call this anticipation “sacramental” in that it is the realisation already in this world of what it points to in the next, a “sacramental anticipation” of the “other world”. It is an

anticipation of the “other world” in the same way that the first light of dawn heralds the break of day and is an anticipation of it. The light of dawn is not an imitation of true daylight. It’s the real thing, only not yet at its full strength. That state of being described by the words “In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they are like the angels” (Matthew 22) is already becoming a reality in men and women accepting the call to perpetual continence. The presence in this world of men and women living out this vocation is nothing other than the dawning of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Heaven breaking upon our world.

The Theology of the Body follows the words of Jesus and refers to this vocation as continence “for the kingdom”. Why is this vocation to perpetual continence said to be “for the kingdom”?

First, a bit of autobiography that might help to illustrate. I came into contact with the Benedictines through my schooling. I was educated by them from the age of eight at Ampleforth. As a young boy I looked on Ampleforth as something more than a merely human institution. I had a sense of something otherworldly about this setup, though I could not have articulated it at the time. There was something about it that went beyond ordinary human virtue, beyond ordinary human achievement, beyond ordinary human powers. I do believe in retrospect that I sensed something of the other world being in some way anticipated in this humble monastic community. I can’t say what it was that made me sense this about Ampleforth. True there was one individual monk who made a deep impression on me from my earliest days there. But there were also a lot of monks that I had no regard for at all, or even disliked. I know I had a high regard for the school they ran. Whatever it was that I sensed about Ampleforth, whether it was what they were or what they did, I had a strong sense of calling to dedicate my life to it. This sense of calling became particularly strong when it was suggested to me that Ampleforth would not survive unless men gave up their lives to join the community. I can’t say that it was an attractive option. The thought of never getting married and never having ordinary family life was daunting and rather dreadful. In fact there was very little that was appealing about the monastic life. There was just this conviction that Ampleforth must be kept going at all costs. It was a cause that justified all the sacrifices involved in joining the monastic community and giving my life over to support this cause.

The vocation to perpetual continence is “for” the kingdom in the (objective) sense that those who embrace this vocation “bring on” the Kingdom of Heaven. They swell the tide of this sacramental anticipation, the anticipation of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the objective finality of the vocation, the end result that men and women bring about when they embrace this vocation. But John Paul also speaks of a “subjective finality” that plays an essential role in the vocation to perpetual continence. When an individual embraces the call to continence he does so “for the kingdom”. “For the kingdom” is the motivation for embracing perpetual continence. He undertakes the sacrifices of marriage and family life in order, consciously, to pour out his life into this eschatological sign of the “kingdom of heaven”, to become part of this sacramental anticipation. In embracing the call to continence the individual’s will becomes aligned with the will of the one who calls him. God wills this eschatological sign in the world – that’s the objective finality of this vocation – and therefore he calls men and women to it. The individual in embracing the call to continence wills the same thing, and gives his life for this end – the subjective finality.

This coming together of the objective and subjective finality in the vocation to perpetual continence derives from Our Lord's own words in Matthew 19: "It is not everyone who can receive this..., but only those to whom it is given." With these words Jesus seems to be laying down the requirement that those who embrace the call to perpetual continence do so with a mind and heart that embrace it "for the kingdom". This means in the first place some degree of understanding of what it means to embrace celibacy "for the kingdom". But it is not a merely intellectual understanding. It is also an understanding that "becomes active in the human heart" (TB76). The objective finality "for the kingdom" has to become a subjective finality, something that is alive and on fire in the one called to continence "for the kingdom". The human will must to some extent be attuned to the divine will, the will to establish on earth this eschatological sign. "It is not everyone who can receive this" means more than merely accepting the call to perpetual continence. It means receiving it into the heart in a way that includes a zealous response of the will. "...But only those to whom it is given" indicates that this calling is not something generated by Man but given from above, together with the grace that enables the recipient to embrace the calling to perpetual continence.

Continence for the Kingdom is a new vocation, new with the Christian era. In this it stands in stark contrast to the vocation of Marriage. Marriage, remember, is the primordial sacrament. It goes right back to the beginning. Our first parents were called to this vocation. But in the tradition of the Old Testament there is no room for the meaning of the body that Christ reveals in the vocation to perpetual continence. (TB 74). Everything in the Old Testament spoke in favour of marriage (eg Genesis 17, eg Judges 11:37 "Grant that I may go and bewail my virginity"), and continence was associated with physical defect. What Jesus inaugurates in the words of Matthew 19 is something shockingly new, and Jesus allows the full shock of this departure in the words he chooses to inaugurate it: "...there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven".

However, it is not the words of Jesus that inaugurate this new vocation. It is the life of Jesus himself who embraced continence for the kingdom of heaven. In fact the words of Matthew 19 "...there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" may be a self-reference. He's pointing to his own personal example. The humanity of Christ inaugurates the final age, and the dawning of the Kingdom of Heaven. Those who receive this vocation, those to whom it is given, do so in imitation of Christ.

What does the celibate do with his or her sexuality? Is it somehow left behind as redundant. Again the answer is No, just as it was in the case of the resurrection and the "other world". The primary purpose of human sexuality goes beyond marriage and procreation. God created Man male and female in order to inscribe in the human body the "spousal meaning", that Man is created with a capacity for bodily self-gift, and that he finds his fulfilment in self-giving. As we saw in the previous cycle, the "spousal meaning" of the human body carries through the resurrection into the "other world", where the human body undergoes a new "spiritualisation" and the sexuality of the human body attains its ultimate purpose and meaning. In the "other world" that is realised in the resurrection, Man lives the "spousal meaning" of the body in his direct self-gift to his Creator. The role of human sexuality in the vocation to perpetual

continence can only be understood in this context, because the vocation to perpetual continence has its meaning only as a (sacramental) anticipation of the “other world”. Yes, in this life God calls some to live the spousal meaning of the body in marriage. But he calls others to live the spousal meaning of their bodies by giving themselves in perpetual continence: giving themselves first and foremost directly to God, and finding in this act of self-giving to God the intersubjectivity of all. John Paul quotes *Gaudium et Spes* 24. “When man chooses continence for the kingdom of heaven, he has the awareness that in this way he can realize himself “differently” and in some sense “more” than in marriage, by becoming a “sincere gift for others”. (TB 75). This realization of self through self-gift is “more” than in marriage because it tends towards the direct gift of self to God in which we find our final and ultimate fulfilment. It anticipates (sacramentally) the mutual self-giving between Man and his Creator, and in doing so it anticipates the intersubjectivity in God of all, of the Communion of Saints.

The “spousal meaning” of the body is seen most perfectly in Christ, who lived continence “for the kingdom” to the highest degree. (TB 75). The “spousal meaning” was inscribed in his human bodiliness. Moreover, like our first parents in the situation of Original Innocence, he lived with the full consciousness of the “spousal meaning” of his body. He lived with that total awareness that enabled him to live on the level of meaning and to be experientially aware of the spousal meaning inscribed in his body. In other words he was fully conscious at every moment of his human existence that in his male bodiliness he was Gift, specifically Gift to the Father, the incarnation of eternal Gift. He lived this spousal meaning in his perfect self-gift to the Father in the Paschal Mystery, an act of self-giving that was at one and the same time to the Father and to the world.

There are moments in his earthly life that reveal the absolute and eternal “spousal meaning” of the body with particular clarity. The Transfiguration is a transfiguration of Christ in his bodiliness, in his maleness, and is occasioned by an ecstatic experience of communion, of mutual self-giving between Christ and his Father. But also the Baptism in which he begins the supreme act of human self-giving to the Father and is accompanied by an experience of the Trinity. The moments when he is caught up in contemplation of the Father, for example when he spends whole nights in prayer, are moments that reveal with particular clarity Christ’s bodily self-gift to the Father, and so reveal with particular clarity the spousal meaning of the body . Gethsemane is the supreme example of this. “Thy will be done”. Crowning all these revelations of the spousal meaning of the body is Calvary. The consummation of his self-gift to the Father in the paschal mystery is the exact reflection of his eternal self-gift to the Father as the Eternal Son. I read somewhere, though not in John Paul, that the nakedness of Jesus on the cross was particularly significant for this reason. The human body, in its nakedness, carries the spousal meaning. His male body, in its nakedness, proclaimed the deed he was in the process of accomplishing – the perfect act of self-giving. There can be no clearer demonstration that the spousal meaning of the human body is lived out not only in marriage. Christ’s total giving of himself to the Father and to the world in the Paschal Mystery is a radically different way, and indeed the supreme way, of living the spousal meaning of the body. And because the Paschal Mystery inaugurates the Kingdom of God, this is also the supreme example of continence “for the kingdom”.

The man or the woman who embraces the call to continence for the kingdom, does so in imitation of Christ. But it is not only in imitation of Christ. It is also a participation in Christ, a participation in Christ's continence "for the kingdom". It is a participation in the redemptive work of the Paschal Mystery. Those who embrace the vocation to continence "for the kingdom" participate in a particular way in the establishment of the kingdom. Christ preached the kingdom in its temporal realization, and at the same time foretold it in its eschatological fulfilment (TB79). If he calls some to continence "for the kingdom", it follows from the content of this expression that he calls them to participate in this exceptional way in the establishment of the kingdom on earth, to participate in the dawning of the kingdom. The expression "for the kingdom" carries within itself the conviction that it is possible in this way to contribute more to the realisation of the kingdom in its earthly dimension than in marriage. (TB 79).

Nor does Christ hide from his disciples the renunciation that is involved in embracing this calling. "It is not everyone that can receive this, but only those to whom it is given." It involves the renunciation of a good, the good of marriage, to which Man is naturally attracted to. This renunciation "for the kingdom of heaven" is connected with a certain self-sacrifice, which must be accompanied by other elements of self-sacrifice for consistency: in particular the evangelical counsel of obedience. This too is in imitation of Christ, and a participation in the obedience of Christ, which constitutes an integral part of his act of self-giving to the Father. Through the seriousness and depth of the decision to accept this call, through the momentousness of the renunciation involved, what shines forth is the readiness to make the exclusive gift of self "for the kingdom". (TB 79).

But marriage also involves a renunciation. (TB 85). The one who marries renounces the possibility of embracing the call to continence "for the kingdom". Marriage is tied to the stage of this world and thus imposes the necessity of being locked in this transitoriness. It's a period of transition to the open horizon of direct and immediate self-gift to God. Choosing marriage necessitates the commitment, while in this world, to a limitation; it involves renunciation of the freedom to live for the Lord with its horizon in eternity already in this world.<sup>1</sup> Abstaining from marriage liberates from such necessity and leaves the horizon wide open to the eternal and to direct and immediate union with God. It's exactly for this reason the Apostle declares that the one who chooses continence "does better". In a conference I gave on the Theology of the Body one of the male participants, a married man, made a comment at the end of the presentation on this cycle "continence for the kingdom". He recognised it was his calling to give himself in marriage, and through marriage to give himself to God. But he longed to give himself directly to God. A good friend in the group said it was just as well his wife wasn't present at the time to hear that, to which we all laughed. But it occurred to me afterwards that this was the mark of a good marriage, and theirs was an exemplary marriage. It's perfectly right that those in marriage should have a holy longing for the "other world" where they do not marry, and where they can give themselves directly to God. It struck me that it is a mark of a good and holy marriage

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that spouses do not "live for the Lord" in and through their marriage. The contrast drawn here will in due course be complemented by the teaching in cycle E, where JP2 gives the most exalted teaching on marriage: As will be seen, the mutual self-giving of the spouses in marriage takes on the sacramental form that it took "in the beginning" of the mutual self-communication of life between Creator and Man, but now with a specifically Christological foundation.

that the spouses should awaken in one another a longing to give themselves directly to the Lord. After all, that is our final and ultimate destiny and where we find our final and ultimate fulfilment.

We've looked at the role of human sexuality in the call to perpetual continence. It carries the "spousal meaning" of the body, which is lived out in direct self-gift to God, and in this mutual self-giving between Man and Creator is discovered the intersubjectivity of all, the Communion of Saints. But is there a difference between male and female in this regard? Do men and women called to perpetual continence live the "spousal meaning" of the body differently according to the sexual difference between the male and female body? Recall that in the previous cycle, in the context of the "other world" John Paul wrote:

The keeping of masculinity and femininity despite taking neither husband nor wife is explained by the "eschatological authenticity" of the response to that "self-communication" of the Divine Subject that will constitute the beatifying experience of God's gift of self. (TB 68).

The same must go for the men and women living the "spousal meaning" of the body in the vocation of perpetual continence in anticipation of the "other world". For the maleness or femaleness of the human subject to be in some sense left out of the equation would be to render the reciprocal self-giving between God and Man less than authentic, whether we're talking about the "other world" or "continence for the kingdom" as its eschatological anticipation. Conclusion: The man or woman called to continence for the kingdom lives this vocation authentically only if the reciprocal self-giving in this vocation between self and God authentically engages the maleness or femaleness of the human body. But the difference between men and women and how they live the "spousal meaning" of the body in the vocation to perpetual continence remains unanswered. John Paul does not analyse what is specifically "male" and what is specifically "female" in the way that men and women respectively give themselves to God when they embrace the call to "continence for the kingdom". Nor does he attempt to explain how such a call is formed on the basis of the consciousness of the spousal meaning of the body in its maleness and femaleness. As I suggested in the previous cycle this may be inevitable given our limited and narrow understanding of what it means to be male and female in their full content.

But I believe we can gain some insight into this question by placing before ourselves once again the image of Christ in the very act of his self-giving on the Cross. Christ had the full consciousness of the spousal meaning of his body. This means that he was fully orientated in his humanity to making a perfect bodily gift of himself. And this he accomplished on Calvary. You could say, and I think it's true to say that this is the whole thrust of the Theology of the Body, that in his humanity Christ's vocation to give himself completely on Calvary was rooted in his perfect consciousness of the "spousal meaning" of his body. This is the supreme example of "continence for the kingdom" – the living out of the "spousal meaning" of the body not in marriage but in continence "for the kingdom".

Is there not something specifically "male" about Christ's gift of himself on Calvary? Is there not something specifically "male" about this particular way of living the "spousal meaning" of the human body – the gift of oneself by the actual giving up of one's life as an act of perfect love? I mentioned earlier how one author I read recently saw the perfect correspondence between the male bodiliness of Christ naked on the

Cross and the deed that he was in the midst of accomplishing. The deed he accomplished on Calvary was to make a perfect bodily sacrifice of himself to the Father. But it was also the laying down of his life for his Bride the Church, for her salvation. This is the way that Christ was called in his humanity to live the “spousal meaning” of his body. This was the way that Christ perfectly embraced the call to “continence for the kingdom”.

John Eldredge in his book *Wild at Heart* gives some useful content to the differences between male and female in their human subjectivity. At the core of every man’s heart, he writes, is a battle to fight, and adventure to live, a beauty to rescue. Isn’t this also core to the human heart of Christ: the battle for Man’s redemption, the rescue of his beloved Bride, and to sweep her up into the adventure of paradise? Conversely at the core of every woman’s heart is the yearning to be fought for, the yearning to be swept up into the adventure, the yearning to be delighted in. If you read the Old Testament and in particular the Psalms these three yearnings – to be fought for, to be delighted in, and to be swept up into the adventure of the Promised Land – are what the People of Israel yearned for throughout their history, and what the Church now rejoices in since the coming of Christ. (see John Eldredge – *Wild at Heart*, Chapter 2 “The Wild One Whose Image We Bear”).

Christ is the supreme example of continence for the kingdom and lives out the “spousal meaning” of his male body in giving himself completely to his people to the point of giving his life for them, and at the same time giving himself completely to the Father. This line of thought helps me to account for the experience of my own vocation to perpetual continence and the giving of myself to a community rather than to a wife, that seemed, certainly at the outset, to involve so much self-renunciation, and the burning question of What do I do with my maleness? Is the male call to perpetual continence in some small way an imitation of or a participation in the self-gift of Christ to his Church (as well as the direct self-gift to God)? Whereas from what I’ve heard from women celibates is there more a sense of being a “bride of Christ” and therefore being in some way a sign or even a sacramental participation in the brideship to Christ of the Church? This line of inquiry would be better pursued by a female celibate who could look into her own bodily experience in her call to continence for the kingdom.

A reflection on the continence of the ministerial priesthood. In my own case the call to give my life for a monastic community has, since my ordination, changed its focus to the call to give myself to the Church as a priest. I know that this vocation too was already nascent in my childhood and seemed to arise in response to a specific call: an appeal made to us as boys that the Church was in need of priests, in need of young men prepared to give up their lives and serve in this capacity. However imperfectly I actually live this calling, there is a growing awareness in me that this really is a participation in the priesthood of Christ. His gift of himself on Calvary was the culmination in his humanity of a deep and mature consciousness of the spousal meaning of the body in its maleness. The giving of myself to God and to the Church in perpetual continence as a priest is a tiny participation in Christ’s gift of himself as the supreme High Priest to the Father and to the Church. The renunciation involved is the renunciation of marriage in perpetual continence, the foregoing of that particular way of living the “spousal meaning” of the body in its maleness. But with this renunciation comes the gradual awakening to a new awareness of the body and the

meaning of the body, the gradual discovery of this other way, this deeper way, of living out the “spousal meaning” of the body in its maleness.

Returning to the main thrust of this cycle, men and women who give their lives in perpetual continence do so for the kingdom. In doing so they live out the “spousal meaning” of the body in its maleness and femaleness in a way that does not involve marriage. They live the “spousal meaning” of the body by making a direct self-gift of themselves to God. The call to “continence for the kingdom” of course comes in different ways to each individual. But the Theology of the Body indicates that it is also based to some extent, or should be based to some extent, on an experiential consciousness of the “spousal meaning” of the body – that the individual is led to give themselves in this way on account of their consciousness of the “spousal meaning” of the body, and the desire to live this through self-gift in perpetual continence. This experiential consciousness of the “spousal meaning” of the body can be expected to grow through fidelity to this calling. The self-giving in the calling to “continence for the kingdom” is the direct self-giving of Man to God. In this it is an anticipation of the resurrection and of the “other world”, the eternal realm in which self-gift to God is direct and is the living out of the absolute and eternal “spousal meaning” of the body. It is the dawning of the kingdom of heaven.

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