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tive and unproductive. Virginity is presumed to be far distant from loving and being loved; some see it as gloomy. In our day, the gloominess is emphasized by way of tasteless jokes about virgins, inevitably assumed to be ugly or frigid or both.

Virginity could, indeed, be gloomy, I suppose, were it sterile, infertile, incapable of giving birth. **But every virgin can give spiritual birth to countless souls, if the virgin can offer himself or herself to Christ with the passion and commitment with which a man and a woman can offer themselves to each other.** This is to become a virgin for the kingdom of heaven, as was the case with Mary. The virgin can become a wonderful channel of grace to the world, as was Mary.

It was the Holy Spirit who overwhelmed Mary at the Annunciation. It is the Holy Spirit who overwhelms the priest at his ordination. Mary offered her virginity; the priest offers his. Mary brought forth the Word into a manger; the priest brings forth the Word onto the altar.

Who understands the mystery that Christ had to be born to a virgin if God was to be His Father? Mary's virginity was necessary, it would appear, to "preserve Christ's divinity." The whole thrust of the Gospel of John is that

Christ comes from "above." It's beyond all of us, but in latter years I have pondered it more and more, and with the pondering has come an **ever-deepening appreciation of virginity as positive and fruitful, dynamic and glowing.** I have come to realize that I must "exercise" my virginity, must use it somehow to help God bring forth His Son in others. I must testify that Christ comes from "above." I help "divinize" people by fathering them through my virginity. **As a husband and wife exercise their sexual capacities to reproduce their love of each other, so I must exercise my virginity to reproduce my love of Christ. And in so doing, I find myself ever so much closer to Mary, and much more of a companion**

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to her Son, who called me to follow Him.

Disciplining ourselves in chastity, we make possible the exercise of virginity. "Give, and it shall be given to you; good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over, shall they pour into your lap." (Luke 6:38) **So shall that priest reap the harvest of souls who in his virginity is called to and becomes a true companion to Christ.**

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THE WONDER OF CELIBACY

By John Cardinal O'Connor
Archbishop of NY 1984-2000

*"I have come to realize that I must
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Every reporter knows that "dog bites man" is not news; "man bites dog" is news. **Day after day after day, all over the United States, from the concrete jungles of the biggest cities to the loneliest hamlets in the prairies, nuns and brothers, priests and bishops and arch-bishops live out their lives of celibacy and chastity. It's a story that never makes news, a love story, sometimes filled with pain and anguish, but always beautiful.** Let a priest slip, however, or a nun or a bishop, and it's news—even front page news.

It should be. I am proud that it is. Were it happening routinely, were the thousands upon thousands of religious men and women and priests and bishops in the United States ignoring their vows, not one would be considered worth an eighth of an inch in print. I wrote about them with great pride a few months ago. Recent news stories bring me back to the same subject.

I am not impressed, for example, by stories being bandied about that at least half of the priests in the United States have violated their vows. I don't know half of the priests in the US, but virtually every priest I do know is working away day and night at trying to keep his vows. How many have slipped or fallen?

God knows without counting. In fact, I thought that “body counts” had become discredited in Vietnam. We are all weak, every single one of us, and we don’t get stronger with age. Every day, any day, could be our Waterloo. Should that shock anyone? **To long for a wife and children, a family, a home of his own, someone who cares whether he lives or dies—in my view, that’s the healthiest longing in the world. That’s one of the reasons that being a priest is to live a daily sacrifice.**

It’s tough to be a good priest. Our concern should not be how many priests may have slipped or fallen, but that if *one* has, he pick himself up and start all over again. Christ fell a number of times on the way to His crucifixion, but He never gave up. Neither do the overwhelming number of our priests.

Which brings me to the wonder of celibacy. It is astonishing, and in my honest opinion, absolutely childish, to read and hear the number of people— some priests and theologians among them—telling us these days that celibacy is antiquated and should be abolished. Even some non-Catholic writers— and, in fact, some anti-Catholic writers— don’t hesitate to tell us how ridiculous the notion of celibacy purportedly is today.

Some tell us celibacy is the cause of all sexual sins on the part of priests. Some tell us celibacy is the number one obstacle to vocations. Some tell us celibacy violates our human rights. To all these categorizers I say “Bah humbug!”

First, celibacy and sexual sins. I have even seen editorials in secular newspapers criticizing the Church’s requirements of celibacy on the grounds that it is responsible for sexual sins. As Chesterton would put it, that’s like blaming Noah’s Ark for the Flood! Do married laymen never sin? If they do, should we abolish mar-

riage as the cause of sin? Do married Protestant clergy never sin? Do pornographic magazines and movies and TV shows depend on celibates for their survival? **I suspect that the real problem is that those who have never even tried to control their own passions take for granted that both celibacy and chastity are impossible. They look at everyone with lustful eyes, think of women as nothing but sex objects, have no sense that a celibate can be deeply in love—in love with God, in love with the Church, with the crucified Christ and the people Christ loved enough to have died for.**

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Next, celibacy and vocations. If celibacy is the major obstacle to vocations, why do they have more candidates for seminaries in Korea and in parts of Africa than they can accept? Is there something “wrong” with such candidates? A few weeks ago, I welcomed 22 new candidates into theology in St. Joseph’s, our archdiocesan seminary. Is there something wrong with them that they are willing to give up families of their own to serve others? At this very moment thousands of young people are being shipped to the Middle East. They are expected to give their lives, if need be, to die for what? For their country? For freedom? For oil? For a cause the world has yet to define clearly? Whatever the reason, they merit enormous respect and gratitude. I pray that not one of them dies. I pray that if anyone of them does die, he or she will know why.

Our nation obviously believes it has the right to ask them to make the supreme sacrifice. Should we be shocked that the Church asks men who would be priests that they sacrifice that which is precious, but which surely is less than life itself? Should we be shocked that there are men willing to make that sacrifice? I believe there are many reasons for the shortages of vocations. I do not believe that celibacy is a major reason, but suppose it were? What are the next demands? And the next? “You have not chosen Me; I have chosen you...If you would come after Me, take up your cross.”

Isn’t it amazing that we take for granted that if a man is irrevocably in love with a woman, he will give up everything, including his life, for her, but that we are skeptical of those willing to give up everything for Christ? Isn’t it astonishing that we expect police officers to lay down their lives in the service of others, but believe that’s abnormal for men who are priests? Priests know that celibacy is not without the grace of God. Nor is either celibacy or chastity easy, even with the grace of God, any more than either is easy for the widow or widower, the divorced unable to remarry, the single person in the world.

I want to refer to an activity that celibacy helps make possible: the positive exercise of virginity. The concepts of chastity and virginity are ridiculed today in many quarters in lay life— certainly in movies, television, literature, etc. It seems to be taken for granted that no one who has reached puberty takes virginity the slightest bit seriously. I don’t believe that’s true, but it’s certainly a widespread assumption.

Even people who respect virginity, however, too often see it as passive, or nega-