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2003 CIRCULAR LETTER

ON CONSECRATED CELIBACY AND VIRGINITY

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

My two previous circular letters took as their theme the following of Jesus (2001) and gospel radicalism (2002). The present letter on consecrated celibacy and virginity fits into this same context and is intended to complete the triptych. I consider our consecrated celibacy and virginity to be eloquent signs of gospel radicalism and of the following of Jesus.

I am trying to bring something new to Cistercian anthropology in its cenobitic form. In other words, the main focus of this letter will be anthropological, not closed in on itself, but open to existential spirituality and faith. This explains why I will pick up the discussion from its well-springs and bring it to the heights of mystical communion with the Lord.

You will notice, however, that I have left other themes aside, such as homosexuality and homophobia, friendship and falling in love, chastity and community, virginity-celibacy and fraternal communion, consecrated life and married life. To have included them would have complicated matters and overstepped the limits of a letter with rather modest claims.

As far as possible, I will take gender differences into account, although for obvious reasons the discourse will have a masculine color and stamp. I would have liked to use a consistently inclusive language, but the character of my own mother-tongue does not allow me to do so without falling into complicated and annoying formulations. Likewise, I am well aware that the doctrine here set forth would need to be enriched with contributions from cultures different from my own. As the years go by, I become increasingly aware of this latter limitation.

And I conclude this introduction with a warning—half seriously, half joking: this letter is forbidden to persons under the age of 18 or over the age of 95. It is not recommended for any who suffer from spiritual shortsightedness or mental paralysis. It is recommended for those who have good will, and, above all, time.

Images of God

The Judeo-Christian revelation teaches us about our origins: we were created in the image and likeness of God. We are therefore *somebody* and not something. We are able to know and know each other, possess and give ourselves. We are capable of communing with others. Created in the image and likeness of God, we are human persons, men and women. Daily experience confirms these basic and elementary assumptions of biblical anthropology. Thus God reveals himself to us and teaches us through our deepest experiences.

God created us men and women, not in isolation, but rather in reciprocal spousal relationship, respecting personal equality and sexual difference with no kind of subordination or gradation. Moreover, God himself tells us that personal equality and sexual difference between man and woman reflect the mystery of the Trinity. In the Trinity there is maximum difference within one absolute identity. We were created in the image of that unique triune God.

We are persons, I and each of us, because we are intimately an "I", existing in relation with a "you" and many others. In other words, we are autonomous and independent in order to live in solidarity and interdependence.

As a man, I can say that she—woman—is other. This irreducible difference is for me the most radical sign of the totally Other, God. I suppose that they—women—could say the same of me and each of us men.

Each and every one of us becomes increasingly personalized throughout our lifetime. This process of personalization involves numerous relationships with individuals, family, and groups. Moreover, we are products of the histories and cultures of our respective nations and continents. Were it not for others—both men and women—we would be nobody and nothing.

Human history, however, is also full of drama. Sin separated us from God, made God's image in our being opaque, and broke God's likeness in us. Sin therefore mortally wounded and continues to wound reciprocity between man and woman. This sin uses power in order to divide: power of dominance and power of seduction. The Son of God became man to restore in us the lost likeness and to make the image shine in all its splendor, to give back to us the original integrity and communion.

Personalized bodies

Fat or thin, tall or short . . . we are embodied persons and personalized bodies. Our corporeality affects us totally, both in terms of relationships and in the innermost part of our being. It is by means of my body that I transform creation, for without hands I cannot work. It is by means of my body that I show myself to others or hide from them, for I am not a ghost, not even when I try to conceal my heart.

The body that I am individualizes me in an ongoing way: my body bears traces of the passing of time, and my life experience has left its mark on me. Anyone who has met me will be able to say that Bernardo is thin, of medium height, round-shouldered, gray-haired, with large ears and nose, a furrowed forehead, etc. Those who see me can identify me. The police too, because no two people have the same fingerprints.

We are so inextricably united as body and soul that it is difficult to establish the border. Our spirit becomes visible and vulnerable in our body, and our body interiorizes itself to the point of becoming spirit. I-body-spirit am relationship on all levels: when I eat, when I speak, when I love, when I rise on the last day.

Men and women are distinguished by two forms of “being a body.” Both forms are spousal, that is, capable of expressing love as a gift of self, capable of receiving the gift that is given. Our bodily existence reaches its summit and its epiphany in the gestures of love: caresses, kisses, embrace, union, ecstasy. I-body am capable of communion.

No book of the Holy Scriptures so values the equality between man and woman, love and the human body as does the Song of Songs. The “authoress” of the Canticle speaks of the body in a completely natural way, without negativity; no part of the body is indecent, each gives rise to poetry and song. To interpret the Song of Songs only as an allegory and symbol of God’s love for his people would empty it of realism and mystery. The literal meaning of the text also points to God for, since woman and man are images of God, the experience of interpersonal human love make the *fire* of the Lord God present.

We are humans because we have been taken from the *humus* or dust of the earth, and for that very reason we are bodily. We are also *capax Dei*, that is, open to God, for it was God who breathed the breath of life into us, making us images and likenesses of God. On the other hand, God is *capax hominis*, so much so that he became incarnate and dwelt among us. As humans, we are *imago Dei*: we reflect the solitude of the one Person who created all that exists, and, what is more, we reflect the inscrutable communion of the divine Persons. I suppose no one will be scandalized to hear it said that the Trinity is reflected in that union “as one flesh” open to the gift of life.

Sexually Configured

Both science and faith tell us that our vital energy—breathed into us by God at our creation and a sharing in the primordial or cosmic energy—is processed in the consciousness and gives rise to the manifestations and functions of our human life, most especially affective and sexual life.

Daily experience also shows us that our human bodies are sexually differentiated bodies. In biological terms we can therefore speak of male and female; in more personal terms we speak of men and women, or in terms of gender, masculine and feminine.

To speak of human sexuality is much more than speaking of genitality. Sexuality is a fundamental condition of our lives as persons, it configures our being, the way we feel and work

as human beings. It conditions even our thinking, wanting, and feeling. Creating, loving, and hoping are themselves expressed in a sexually individualized way.

For our purposes here, we will say that sexuality is vital, relational, and creative energy. It has to do especially with affectivity, the capacity to love and procreate and, in a more general way, with aptitude for establishing ties of communion with others. Without distorting its reality, we can distinguish three levels within the unity of our sexuality:

-The level of primary sexuality implies various dimensions, including: the masculine or feminine configuration of our being as persons and bodies, the perception of the whole of reality with masculine or feminine eyes, the proper orientation of man to woman and vice versa, and the natural or cultural behaviors proper to each of the genders.

-The level of affective sexuality, that is, the world of sexually determined feelings with greater or lesser presence of desire or eros, feelings which seek or involve some type of intimacy. Here we have the whole gamut of loves: parental, maternal, filial, or fraternal love, love of friendship, and the erotic love of falling in love. Anticipating a little, I will say that, for celibate persons, this level is an end in itself, whereas, for married persons, it can be the path toward genital behavior.

-The level of genital sexuality, in which we can distinguish between genital fantasies and behaviors. Fantasies are originally situated in the imagination and emotions with consequent resonance in the genital organs. Behaviors are destined to direct activation of the sexual appetite. This is the level of conjugal love, which leads to becoming one flesh and which reaches its fulfillment in orgasm.

The concrete experience of sexuality tends to differ between men and women. For women there is generally a greater need for physical contact, in spite of the fact that their need for genital relations seems less strong than for men. For women, genitality is just one aspect of affective and intimate relationship. Men, on the other hand, tend to "genitalize" sexuality. When this happens, we impoverish eros, physical sensuality, and the capacity for affective intimacy.

Our sexuality evolves in rhythm with the major cycles of our personal lives. It could be no other way, for we are sexually configured persons. Each of us, in accord with his or her capacity for self-knowledge, will be able to notice an evolution along the following general lines:

-In childhood and adolescence, the foundations were laid and there was little possibility of interpreting the meaning of sexuality.

-Throughout youth there is uncertainty and confusion. The passion of sexual love and the charm of falling in love are experienced, but without realizing the richness of heterosexual intimacy and the spiritual potential of sexuality or chastity. We men fear losing our independence, and I think women fear ending up alone or being abandoned. It is during youth that basic decisions are made whether to live out one's sexuality in a conjugal way in marriage, or whether to live it out in consecrated celibacy or virginity.

-In adulthood, there is the full discovery of one's potential for fertility and for generativity, understood as care, concern, accompaniment, and guidance with regard to the younger. The capacity for intimacy and tenderness increases. Eros and desire take on new value. Friendships are consolidated. The need is felt to find the human and spiritual meaning of sexuality and chastity, and one gradually learns that they take on their ultimate meaning in human love and in divine Love. At last one's own sexual history and the choices made become integrated. The experience of menopause (in men too) usually marks a before and an after.

-Lastly, in old age, it is time to experience oneself in fulness and peace as a person whose bodily and sexual dimension is open to and directed toward the transcendent and totally Other.

One need not travel a great deal or live a long life to notice that different cultures and eras regulate and interpret sexuality differently. Many of us are witnesses of an evolution in the understanding of sexuality in the Western world, passing from repressed condemnation to justified permissiveness to consumeristic commercialization. The mass media are making this commercialization universal.

The culture of machismo and unbridled sexuality enslave eros and exult genitality. In other words, the level of genital sexuality displaces and takes over the level of affective sexuality. Thus, eros, seen as life-giving passion and vigor tending toward the joy of communion, is reduced to mere eroticism. In this way, humans become animalized, disintegrated, and set in opposition, particularly men against women and women against men.

Eros is desire for interpersonal communion, fulfillment, and joy, allowing one to experience fulness and give fulness as a gift. Thus understood, eros is both attractive and frightful: attractive for its promise of fulfillment, and frightful because it requires letting go and leaving control aside. Affective intimacy awakens eros, which is attractive. At the same time, however, the intimacy eros invites requires an even greater letting go of control, which causes fear. Although it is not good to play with danger, a life lived without risk is a poor life. Whoever extinguishes the fire of eros and desire turns to ashes.

In a certain sense, human persons need the language of the body and sexuality in order to manifest themselves. The composite person-body-sex is fundamentally the capacity for relationship and the ability to create communion. At its deepest meaning, sexuality is tangible proof of the nuptial nature of the person-body. We monks and nuns, living the "angelic life" as we may, are not angels, and those who claim to be end up as demons.

Loved in order to Love

Claiming to "define" love is like claiming to "understand" God. Nevertheless, let us say something about love, with respect, humility, and love. All manifestations of love, in some form

or another, involve affectivity, desire, and sexuality. Besides its various manifestations or forms, love is attraction and a decision to give oneself to the other and receive the other in order to affirm the other and in order that the other might grow and exist more fully. The principle manifestations of love, which all of us can easily recognize, are the following:

- Maternal love: merciful and naturally unconditional, predominantly affective.
- Paternal love: truthful and spontaneously conditional, principally effective.
- Filial love: dependent, highlighting welcome and respect.
- Fraternal love: universal and amicable, notable for its building up of the other.
- Spousal love: heterosexual love in which predominates the mutual and fruitful self-giving and welcoming as one flesh.
- Social love: just and fair, seeking the common good.

Which of these manifestations of love can be taken as the paradigm of love and as the clearest sign of divine Love? While respecting differing opinions, I will risk an answer. If it is true that the image of God in the human being refers to man and woman, and if it is true that the relation between them is a spousal relation, and if we can say that the body in its sexual dimension is a spousal body, then we can conclude with this statement: spousal love between man and woman is the paradigmatic form of human love.

Spousal human love takes on two concrete existential forms, the one, a conjugal expression of spousal life in marriage, the other, a virginal or celibate expression of spousal life lived in communion with Christ. In both forms, the essential thing is the gift of self and the reception of the other. This kind of love makes us like God, for it purifies the image, allowing it to reflect Love.

One need not be seventy years old to understand that men and women love in a different way. When a woman loves, she gives herself over entirely, body, soul, and spirit: the present, the future, and even the possible future are and will be according to the desires of the one loved. We men want to be loved in this way, but we rarely love this way ourselves. What most attracts a man is physical beauty, whereas a woman begins by admiring talent, strength, and a gentleman's manner. Our masculine intelligence can fail to recognize love, whereas a woman always recognizes it, knowingly or unawares.

Modest and Chaste

We learn in the catechism that human virtues are firm and stable attitudes. They perfect our intelligence and will, regulate our actions, order our affections, guide our conduct. Thanks to the virtues we can act with ease, mastery, and joy in order to live good and happy lives. When we practice the good in a free and joyful manner, it can be said that we are virtuous.

Before speaking of chastity, a word is called for concerning its older brother, modesty. Modesty is a virtue that receives little and poor press today. The prudishness or excessive fear of the sexual that characterized the recent past in some cultural milieus were of no great help in this regard. While it is true that modesty is relative and conventional, its forms varying according to

time and place, I nevertheless consider modesty to be an innate and connatural sentiment in the human person.

Modesty, thus understood, is an instinct that defends the values of sexuality, especially a sexuality that is integrated within itself and harmonious in its relationships. It is a sentiment linked to the incarnation of the spirit; it points to the personal intimacy inherent in love, eros, and sex. Without modesty, there is no true love. Love dialogues with modesty. Modesty hides and protects intimacy until one is loved and accepted in one's totality, rather than just out of the attraction awoken by the beauty or vigor of the body. Finally, when love has proved itself true, modesty loses its own purpose and is assumed and integrated into love.

In the not-so-distant past, the practice of chastity and reflection about chastity were reduced to sexual continence. Such a minimal approach deprived chastity of its value and importance. Chastity is a virtue, a strength, or a power that allows us to love as persons with a sexual dimension. To love in a personal way out of this dimension means to love in an ordered, harmonious way.

In each one of us it is chastity that orders sex, eros, and love, putting them at the service of charity and communion. To be a human person requires constantly mastering and channeling merely instinctive and sexual impulses. It requires filling out the sexual dimension by means of the erotic dimension, and calls for expanding both dimensions into interpersonal love, crowning this whole dynamic with charity.

Chastity allows one to establish harmonious relationships with others. Basically, this harmony consists of accepting differences, respecting privacy, discerning the proper distance and gestures, communicating in a person-to-person way, being totally present in the relationship.

The pedagogy of chastity teaches us that the first lesson to learn in ordering and harmonizing our sexuality means quite simply this: to contemplate what goes on in our affectivity, and more particularly in our sexuality, with lucidity, peace, and detachment. It means recognizing it and letting it move on.

Each one of us, both men and women, know by spiritual instinct what chastity demands and advises. In any case, for us monks and nuns, experience has shown us what helps:

- Respect for others, especially for others of the opposite sex. To respect is to look more deeply, to commune with a *thou*. Respectful people consider genital expression to be a manifestation of the whole person. They neither identify themselves nor others with just one part of the body.

- Life in fraternal communion, not just life together. When the affective climate of the community is positive, both interior integration and harmonious relationships are more easily attained.

- Deep friendship and relationship with people who share the same ideal of a chaste life, especially with those who have a vocation to consecrated celibacy and virginity.

-Creativity in our work, even in the simplest kind of daily work. Those who work in this way apply themselves to what they are doing and enjoy doing so. They cooperate with others and seek new and better ways of serving the neighbor.

-Forgoing immediate and passing gratifications in order to attain more lasting and deeper ones. This means saying “no” willingly and in full awareness, basing it on an affirmative “yes”.

-Chastity is a process that takes time. It is seldom a linear process. Our chastity—we might even say our celibacy or virginity—is the fruit of a story that evolves over time. The fruit of this tree is precious, but slow to mature. The day we can sing with the *Poverello* of Assisi, “Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water, so useful, humble, precious and pure,” then we will be virgin and chaste in the fullest sense.

Consecrated as Virgins or Celibates

I am coming at last to the heart of this letter. When speaking of consecrated celibacy and virginity, I am referring not simply to a physical condition or to a sociological situation, but rather to a stable form of life, chosen in response to a call in the context of faith in Christ the Lord. This state of life gives public witness to a form of living chastity and love.

Whether celibate, virgin, or married, all are called to love. Conjugal love includes the genital dimension of freely engaged sexuality. As monks and nuns consecrated in virginity or celibacy, we have renounced marriage in a totally free way, but this does not mean we have renounced loving or that we love only in a seraphic way.

Consecrated celibacy and virginity require ongoing growth in a way of life that, thanks to chastity, allows one to love in a specific way. This specific form implies renouncing any kind of genital love. To put it more clearly, it implies renouncing a kind of belonging that is mutual and exclusive, stable and ongoing, intimate and fertile . . . along with all this implies in terms of daily living together and mutually helping each other with the existential solitude of each. This self-denial makes possible the gift of another form of loving that is focused on self-offering, gratitude and service. This form of love also involves the joy and pain inherent in affective sexuality.

I will now express to you in a simple way my personal convictions about consecrated celibacy. I do so, hoping that each one will reflect on his or her own personal convictions and motivations.

-My celibacy is above all a gift or a charism: it is a gift that involves a task, a gift to be achieved in peace. It is a charism of the Spirit for my personal well-being, for the

enrichment of my brothers and sisters, for the building up of the Church, and for service to humanity. It is a charism of love for the sake of loving.

-The fundamental motivation for my celibacy is Jesus and his Kingdom. I live out this charism in the concrete existential circumstances of common fraternal life, thus obtaining that the “Kingdom come,” that is, everyone living under the same Father as brothers and sisters.

-It is an ever renewed decision to make real God’s utopia in creating us for complementary or spousal reciprocity in God’s image and likeness. In this sense, I see my celibacy as something important for the cultivation of relationships with women.

-Within the human history of sin and grace, my celibacy is a renouncing of the genital manifestation of love for the sake of removing from love any kind of possessive selfishness or dominant aggressiveness. I likewise renounce sexual satisfaction for the sake of a greater happiness-beatitude. Celibate love is my way of responding to the question we must all answer: How do I satisfy the need for complementarity and belonging that is ingrained in my sexuality?

-Thanks to the charism of consecrated celibacy, I can clarify and bear witness to the deep anthropological meaning of the values inherent to sexuality. I live celibacy as a witness of the strength of God’s love within my human fragility. For me it is a “spiritual therapy” that redounds for the good of humanity.

-My celibacy for the Kingdom of heaven is an invitation to give full potential to my generative capacity as father or mother for others. Were my celibacy not life-giving, I would be a castrator. The Kingdom of heaven is not a tomb for burying our sexuality.

The human person is free to give of oneself. Freedom and self-control are intrinsic to self-giving. The gift of self can take on various forms. The spousal gift of one’s own body, in order to become one flesh, is the most common. The spousal gift of self to God in Christ, in order to become one life-giving spirit, is an alternative choice, the fruit of divine grace. Those of us who have received this grace know with certainty that Love is faithful and never leaves us disappointed.

Virgin, Celibate, and Mystic

If we read medieval spiritual authors attentively—especially our Cistercian fathers and mothers—we can distinguish two mystical currents:

-Mysticism of essence and union: communion with God in a deep integration of one’s own soul.

-Mysticism of love and relationship: communion with the divine Thou in terms of nuptial love and covenant.

They both have something in common, and also something that makes it possible to differentiate them. Both the essence-union mysticism and the love-relationship mysticism have desire-eros-love as a driving force. Essence mysticism, however, refers less to intentional interpersonal love and more to the vital, primary energy of desire. Such desire traverses the whole being—body, soul, and spirit—and transforms the whole person.

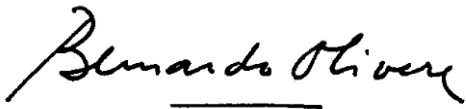
Mystical experience is essentially the communion of wills, the union of God's will and ours, at one in what is wanted or not wanted. It matters little whether we call this *unitas spiritus* or *spiritual marriage*, for this communion resides in love and is brought about by Love. In this experience, the divine image shines forth in all its glory and brilliancy.

God's mystical gifts are infinite. God adapts to diversity, considering what each of us is, taking account of gender and sex differences. Nevertheless, we all have to let ourselves be loved in order to welcome God's gift. This involves enabling our receptive capacity. As human creatures we are all receptive, but a woman, precisely as a woman, is more receptive. For both men and women, the mystical welcoming of Love is an experience "in the spirit," which only exists embodied in a sexually determined body. This statement, so obvious for married people, is less obvious for consecrated persons.

Allow me to conclude with a bit of humor. To live chastely in consecrated celibacy and virginity, we have to learn to laugh, for laughter relaxes us and clears the air. A sense of humor also teaches us that the God of mystical experience is God and is not God: *is* God because it is God who communicates with us first; *is not* God because God is unfathomable mystery. Only thus will our desire open out into a limitless and eternal flight, insatiably satiated. Without putting our smile aside, let us now conclude with a prayer.

O Truth, fatherland of exiles, end of their exile! I see you, but held fast by the flesh I may not enter. Filthy with sins, I am not fit to be admitted. O Wisdom, reaching mightily from end to end in establishing and controlling things, and arranging all things sweetly by enriching the affections and setting them in order! Guide our actions according as our temporal necessities demand, dispose our affections as your eternal truth requires, that each of us may confidently boast in you and say: 'he set love in order in me.' For you are the strength of God and the Wisdom of God, Christ the Church's bridegroom, our Lord and God who is blessed for ever. Amen. (SC 50,8).

With a fraternal embrace in Mary of Saint Joseph,



Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General OCSO

