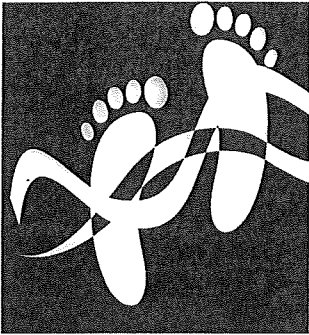


The unique witness of the single life



This article asks 'What do single people offer that is unique and irreplaceable in the life of the Church?'

The single life can be a perplexing vocation. It defies neat definition and escapes the explicit attention of the church. Single people live with an openness to marriage, but they are not married. They are called to live chastely but do not take a vow of celibacy. It is said that single people have the advantage of being able to spend their time, energies and 'freedom' on building up the church. While this may be true to a certain extent, it can imply that the single vocation is about the good works one 'does' rather than who the single person is in their very being and identity.

It is also said that single people live out their vocation through their baptism. Of course! But every Christian is baptised. What does the single vocation witness to, in an intense way, which is not witnessed (as intensely) in the married or celibate state?

Over the years an insight into this vocation has been taking shape for me. I submit that the single person witnesses in a unique way to a dimension of the church's eschatological* hope. That is, they embody in a striking way a faithful response to the 'now' but 'not yet' reality of the kingdom of God. Let's explore that statement ever so briefly here.

As Christians we believe that our salvation, our union with God through Christ in the Spirit, is a present reality. We are no longer awaiting the promised Messiah, we believe that Christ has come! We are no longer awaiting the age of salvation; we believe it is here! This is our proclamation of faith.

Yet even as Christians declare and live this conviction they still experience lack of fulfilment. Don't we all know it! Even in the happiest of marriages, in the lives of the most content celibates, there remains times of emptiness, disappointment, a yearning for 'more'. The age of salvation is here, impacting upon our lives, and yet so much remains beyond our grasp. We long for the day when 'Christ will come again' and bring all things to completion. Living with this inherent tension – the kingdom of God *now* but *not yet*, presence and absence, expectancy and empty handedness - is a central challenge for every Christian and for the church as a whole.

I submit that committed Christian single people powerfully embody what it means to embrace this tension, and by doing so call the whole church to a sharper awareness of what it means to be faithful amidst all life's ambiguities, disappointments and question marks. The single person lives with a desire

for and an openness to a celebrated life commitment, but without one. Year after year they celebrate the anniversaries of married and celibate friends, yet never their own. At every turn, they find themselves affirming and supporting the vocations of marriage and celibacy but without any direct, personal benefit to themselves. (There is an awesome selflessness in this.) And yet, the single person does not decisively and formally 'choose' to be single. At its vocational heart their life's perspective is shaped by a sense of expectation and empty handedness, of asking questions of the future and entrusting it to God.

Whilst all of us live without knowledge of the future, in the life of the married or vowed celibate person a large part of that 'not knowing' is relieved. Single people, on the other hand, live with the experience of 'not knowing' (in a vocational sense) at the core of their being. They go forward in life, open to a new and clearly defined commitment (which for most is the hope of marriage), yet accepting of that hope not being – and perhaps never being – fulfilled in the present. The human and spiritual maturity involved in their acceptance of this fact deserves acknowledgment!

Thus our committed single people are precious to the church, not just because of what they 'do' for us, but because of the eschatological hope they embody in *who they are*: believers who grasp the gift of the present moment, who are trusting before an unknowable the future, joyful even without grasping what they most desire, upholding realities of love (marital and celibate) which they themselves may never enter. We are speaking here of a great mystery of faith and love enveloping our committed single people. By their witness the church is deeply nourished and challenged.

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* 'Eschatology' refers to the 'last things', the 'end times'; i.e. the establishment of God's kingdom and the final destiny of humanity.