

Personal testimonies: *Sexuality lived out according to God's design*

SISTER MARIANA, Community of the Lamb

Let me tell you my story. I come from a simple working-class family. Our home did not contain much wealth, but love was our greatest treasure. My parents will soon celebrate forty years of marriage. I have had the grace of witnessing their love for each other and how they transmitted it to their children.

As an adolescent I stopped going to Church and put God into second place. I was infatuated with music and the electric guitar. My life became emptier and emptier and began to have no meaning. I wore black clothes which seemed to reflect the darkness I had within me.

I went to university, and one morning after a night spent studying, I got a notion to take up the Bible. The passage I read was the Beatitudes: Happy are the poor in spirit... [Matthew 5: 3-12]. Happy! I could feel that within me I was crying out: I want to be happy too! But how? The next day I brought the Bible with me to the university. I left it on the seat, and a young man called Fernando approached me.

He was Catholic, and he spoke to me about Jesus with such enthusiasm that I returned to the Church.

I learned three things from him that exploded onto my life like a bomb: daily rosary, the Eucharist and reading of the word of God. My life changed from one day to the next. I no longer wore black, but white. My life had new meaning because Jesus now had first place. Fernando and I took the path of Christian engagement.

One evening I went into a church to pray, and I found some religious sisters there singing vespers. That monastic prayer filled my heart. Later that evening in Fernando's house I told him that I had met some sisters. He burst into tears and said: "you are going to be a nun too!" I was completely taken aback and said: "No!" He said, "You have not seen your face! It is different!"

For some months we searched for God's will together, and I saw that the Lord was calling me to give myself totally to Him, and that making a choice implies foregoing something else.

Two things touched my heart when I met the sisters: prayer and poverty. The beauty of the liturgy sung and celebrated, and going together with other students to help the poor who lived on the streets on the outskirts of Buenos Aires near where the sisters live.

Let me now present the **Community of the Lamb**.

It was founded in Perpignan in France in 1983 and was recognised by the Dominican Order that same year. It is contemplative life amongst the poor, allowing oneself to be recreated by God's word in prayer, the celebration of the liturgy, study of the Word, and to regularly retreat in the "desert".

It is a life proclaiming the Gospel in poverty. As God sent out his disciples, we go out in twos or threes from door to door asking for our daily bread, witnessing to God's mendicant love.

We also proclaim the Gospel in universities. The Community began in that way. The first sister of the Community used to go out with young people to take care of those who were lost in the darkness in difficult areas of Paris.

Consecrated life and marriage

When I was asked to give this testimony, the first thing I did was pray for each of you, for your countries, and for all that you encounter in your daily lives as young people. I shall take you all with me in my heart and in my prayer.

Then I took the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and I read and meditated on the theme of matrimony and the sixth commandment: "You shall not commit adultery".

In the chapter on the sacrament of matrimony, the catechism devotes a section to virginity for the Kingdom of Heaven. The chapter on the sixth commandment has a section on the vocation to chastity. It might seem that these two things contradict each other, but in fact they do not. They actually complement each other and are a motive for mutual growth.

I shall quote two sentences from the Catechism:

"Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church" (CCC 1617), and "the virgin is [...] a transcendent sign of the Church's love for Christ, and an eschatological image of this heavenly Bride of Christ and of the life to come" (CCC 923).

Christ is the spouse of the Church. I like the way in which Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) speaks of this mystery in a discourse to her Carmelite sisters on the vow of chastity. She said:

"Just as it is scarcely possible for one impaired by original sin to own things without clinging to them, so there is also the danger that any natural affection may degenerate into passion with all of its devastating consequences. God has provided two remedies for this: marriage and virginity. [...] Marriage is already a great mystery as the symbol of the bond between Christ and the Church and at the same time as its instrument. But virginity is a still deeper mystery. It is not only the symbol and instrument of bridal union with Christ and of the union's supernatural fruitfulness, but also participates in the union".¹

Life does not come from us. It comes from God who created us and gave Himself for us. God gave us life and moulds us with love that gives of itself and asks for our response. God teaches us the meaning of Love which is to give everything to others and give oneself to others. Love for another person is the basis of matrimonial life. Consecrated life proclaims and reveals the meaning of love. How does it do that? It is by giving oneself with an undivided heart to the Lord who loves us without measure. Our life of covenant with the Lord shows the covenant of God's love with every human being. Marriage is strengthened by this personal covenant with God.

What are the graces that I experience by living consecrated virginity? There are two: fruitfulness and joy.

¹ E. STEIN, "III.4 Exaltation of the Cross 14.9.1941" in: *The Hidden Life*, Washington 1992, [http://www.karmel.at/ics/edith/stein_20.html]

Fruitfulness

John Paul II said in a homily: “Consecrated to God’s love, you, religious sisters and brothers, are not seen by people to be lost beings, but rather the contrary. You are not fathers and mothers of a small family with offspring and descendants, but you are fathers and mothers through a spiritual heritage in a much larger family, God’s sacred family, the Church, ‘Mother and Teacher’ of the nations.”²

The meaning of obedience, poverty and chastity is to progress from having one’s hands closed with the intention of possessing (possess myself, or someone or something) to having one’s hands open to receive.

Obedience without love is slavery, poverty without love is misery, and chastity without love is sterility. So we can say that chastity with love is fruitful.

Words that were fundamental for my final step in preparing for my perpetual profession are from Saint John’s Gospel chapter 15: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit [...] abide in my love.” That fruit is love, and I find the source of this love in the Eucharist and in prayer.

The fruit is also the mission. The Lord sent us out to those who suffer and those who need to know God’s love. The misfortune that many suffer is that they think that nobody loves them. God loves us individually with eternal love, and the light of the Creator shines in our hearts. We have to allow this love to overflow, love that is much needed by the world. The mission of the sisters is in that place where we can be most fruitful.

Two of our sisters once went to the soup kitchen being run by Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity in Barcelona. They stood in the queue with the poor and waited their turn. They sat at table with the others, and opposite them a man began to cry. The sisters asked him why he was crying. He replied: “because today the Church is eating with me”. They were tears of joy for the fact that the meal was being shared with us.

It is written in our Community’s goals and resolutions: “To proclaim the Gospel from the keystone of the presence of Jesus Christ, this is our mission [...] so that the face of Our Lord Jesus Christ who has risen from the dead may shine out and radiate among the very poor to whom we have been sent”.³

Joy

You might wonder how it is possible nowadays to be happy living as a religious.

Joy was the first sign of my vocation. It was not a worldly joy that like chewing gum loses its taste after a few minutes. It was a purifying joy that often asked me to make sacrifices, but that remains with me. These are moments that are never forgotten. Think of your parents and how often they had to make sacrifices in order to educate you and give you the best. Think of how much they had to give up for your sakes. An act of love may not always be directed towards our own happiness, but towards that of someone else. For me that Someone else is God.

Chastity is not a deprivation. It is a school in which we can learn to love as Jesus loved, Jesus who was chaste, poor and obedient.

² JOHN PAUL II, Homily given in Benguela, Angola, 9 June 1992 [our translation].

³ *Propósito de vida de las hermanitas del Cordero* [our translation].

The Holy Father Benedict XVI said at the start of his pontificate: “Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life”.⁴

Before I entered the Community, I prayed before Jesus on the cross and said: “Show me your love!”. As I repeated those words, I felt that there was a voice in my heart saying the same thing to me. I looked at the cross and saw that Jesus had already demonstrated his love. Now it was my turn to respond to Jesus.

To conclude, I would like to leave you with some words spoken recently by Pope Benedict XVI: “The Church is made more luminous and beautiful by the fidelity to their vocation of those sons and daughters who not only put the evangelical precepts into practice but, by the grace of God, are called to observe their counsels and thereby, with their poor, chaste and obedient way of life, to witness to the Gospel as a source of joy and perfection”.⁵

Yes, the Gospel truly is for me a source of happiness. Now I can say in the words of the Beatitudes: Happy are the poor! In Jesus who was poor, I have found my true happiness. I hope that all of you will receive this fruit here at the Forum, and when you return home to daily life, that you will experience the beauty of being Christian and of knowing that you are loved by Jesus.

Thank you.

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the Mass for the inauguration of the Pontificate, 24 April 2005.

⁵ BENEDICT XVI, General Audience, 3 March 2010.