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VIRGINITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There are four New Testament passages which must form the basis of a Christian theology of virginity. Two of these have reference to the practice of virginity by individuals; the other two deal with specific teaching on the subject. Because of the principle of organic progression in biblical revelation, a proper biblical theology of any theme would suggest that those passages whose literary analysis betrays an early date of composition be considered first. And, since it is generally admitted that the Pauline epistles antedate, for the most part, the vast majority of the canonical New Testament writings, we would be justified in examining first of all Paul's thought on the matter. However, both in the Gospels and in the Acts we are confronted with historical data whose theological significance cannot be wholly confined to the period of composition, even though that significance may well have been developed and made explicit in the early Church period. We can, therefore, with good reason begin with the Gospel accounts, keeping in mind the possibility that these texts may reflect, to some extent, a later inspired interpretation of the *gesta et dicta* of the Gospel characters.

New Testament Background

No study of the New Testament teaching on virginity can be undertaken without at least a cursory glance at the attitudes reflected in the Jewish Palestinian milieu of the same period. This background forms one of the more significant arguments for the interpretation of *Lk.* 1,34. The fact that the Jews generally considered marriage a sacred obligation, and child-bearing for the woman a sign of divine favor needs no belaboring. The question is whether there did exist among

some of them at least an estimation of the practice of celibacy. The evidence is contained in four sources and all refer to the Jewish sect known as Essenes.¹

Pliny refers to the Essenes as a very strange race that lives without women, having renounced all sexual relations. They are "an eternal race in which no one is born."² The satirical nature of these remarks does not destroy their historical value, a value that is supported by a reference to the same Essenes in a passage from Philo preserved by Eusebius. In the first part of the passage he says that they repudiate marriage because of their desire to safeguard their community. He follows this up with a description of woman that betrays the misogynous character of Philo and not necessarily that of the Essenes themselves.³ Josephus, too, in one passage describes the Essenes in much the same tenor as Philo,⁴ but in another passage mentions an order of Essenes that considered marriage necessary for the propagation of the race.⁵

Do the recently discovered Qumran Scrolls confirm the testimony of these men? The evidence is somewhat ambiguous.⁶ The discovery of a cemetery containing what seem to be only male skeletons⁷ would indicate for most scholars

¹ The references to the *therapeutae*, found in Philo, are of such dubious character that they can provide no certain evidence other than that Philo, at least, could have conceived of a group of virgins living a community life. Cf. the discussion in R. Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I-II* (Paris, 1957) 185f; M. Zerwick, ". . . quoniam virum non cognosco" (Lc 1,34), in *VD* 37 (1959) 220f.

² Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, Bk. 5, c. 17.

³ *Praepar. Evang.*, Bk. 8, c. 11; *PG* 21, 644 AB. Cf. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 186 for further discussion.

⁴ Josephus, *The Jewish War* (tr. by Thackeray), 2, 119-121.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 160-161.

⁶ Cf. F. M. Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (New York, 1958) 71ff.

⁷ Cf. R. deVaux, O.P., *Fouilles de Khirbet Qumrân, Rapport préliminaire sur les 3^e, 4^e, et 5^e campagnes*, in *RB* 63 (1956) 569-572.

a celibate community.⁸ There is, however, no reference in the texts themselves to celibacy as a condition for membership. Where sexual abstention is referred to is in the passages dealing with the Holy War. During that War "no toddling child or woman is to enter their camps. . . ." ⁹ This statement is significant in the interpretation of the Essenian motivation; the eschatological note is clearly present. And if the Essenes considered themselves to be in the state of preparation for this eschatological period, then their celibacy, if it was practised, would be devoid of any ascetical motives.¹⁰

The question of the practice of celibacy among Palestinian Jews, therefore, is centered, at the present stage of our knowledge, on the Essene community. And the primary sources for that group reveal that the eschatological element is dominant where celibacy is referred to. This may be of some help in understanding the New Testament references to virginity.

Luke 1, 34

The fact of the virgin birth of Our Lord is clearly presented in both the Gospels of Matthew (1, 18-25) and Luke (1, 26-38). Moreover, the fact of Mary's continued virginity after that birth, suggested by such passages as *Lk.* 2, 41-52 and in particular *Jn.* 19, 27,¹¹ would almost certainly point to a firm intention on her part, consented to, of course, by Joseph.¹² The question remains whether this intention had been formed *before* the Annunciation. As we are all aware, the question of Mary's virginity was thoroughly treated at the 1956 meeting

⁸ The existence of female skeletons in the environs suggests that celibacy was not universally practised, or at least throughout the existence of the sect. Cf. deVaux, *art. cit.*, 569-572.

⁹ T. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (New York, 1956) 290.

¹⁰ Cf. Cross, *op. cit.*, 72f; J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea* (London, 1959) 121ff.

¹¹ Cf. the excellent discussion in M.-J. Lagrange, O.P., *Évangile selon Saint Marc* (Paris, 1947) 79-93.

¹² Cf. J.-P. Audet, O.P., *L'annonce à Marie*, in *RB* 63 (1956) 373.

of this Society. At that meeting our particular question was also discussed by Father Neal Flanagan.¹³ Since his survey of opinions was quite exhaustive, it remains for us to ask whether any new light has been shed on the subject since his article.

Father Flanagan showed that an opinion opposed to what can be called the traditional view had gained some ground in recent years. According to this, Mary's statement, "... since I do not know man," simply expresses her betrothed state in which marriage relations were forbidden, and hence an implicit indication of her future intentions. After reviewing the arguments both pro and con, Father Flanagan decided that the traditional exegesis "seems the more probable."¹⁴

The alleged weaknesses, however, of the common exegesis, namely, the difficulty of supposing such an intention in a Jewish maiden for whom child-bearing would normally be considered one of the greatest of God's blessings and especially in one who was ostensibly anticipating the married state, have led many Catholic exegetes to seek another understanding of *Lk.* 1, 34.¹⁵ One of these new solutions was offered by Jean-Paul Audet.¹⁶ Very briefly, his suggestion is this. A study of literary types similar to the Annunciation scene (and Audet would classify messages given in dreams and the word of God addressed to a prophet under the same heading),¹⁷ would indicate that in all cases the divine initiative is taken in accord with the psychological state of the recipient of the message. On this supposition the angel's message to Mary would imply that she had been pondering at the time the prophecy of *Is.*

¹³ N. M. Flanagan, O.S.M., *Our Lady's Vow of Virginity*, in *MS* 7 (1956) 103-121.

¹⁴ *Art. cit.*, 119. Zerwick has given more recently a more detailed rebuttal of this opinion; cf. *art. cit.*, 212-224.

¹⁵ Cf. C. P. Ceroke, O.Carm., *Luke 1,34 and Mary's Virginity*, in *CBQ* 19 (1957) 330.

¹⁶ *Art. Cit.*, 346-374.

¹⁷ *Art. cit.*, 350.

7, 14. The angel's opening address, messianic in its terminology, corresponds to her own thoughts and insinuates to her that she is the 'alma of Is. 7, 14. This explains her confusion or troubled state (*Lk.* 1, 29). The further words of the angel (vv. 30-33) confirm this notion and make it explicit.

It is in this context that her question, then, must be understood. "How shall this happen?" she asks, "since (as the 'alma of Is. 7, 14) I must not know man."¹⁸ The use of the Greek word *epei* ("since") in this sense is attested to in other places in the New Testament¹⁹ and would naturally confer on the verb *ginōskō* a modified sense.²⁰

It is obvious from this brief analysis that the text, in this view, would offer no support at all to a prior intention on the part of Mary to preserve her virginity. Such an intention would only have come afterwards.²¹

Making use of some of Audet's observations, Father Ceroke has proposed an interpretation that justly emphasizes the literary aspects of the passage but that would not exclude a pre-Annunciation consideration of virginity on the part of Mary.²² He shows that in all the biblical passages recording messages and dreams there is a stress on the perplexity of the person involved, resulting, however, not from the message received, but rather from some personal problem being debated *before* the message, and only heightened by the reception of

¹⁸ *Art. cit.*, 369f.

¹⁹ Cf. *1 Cor.* 5,10; 7,14; 15,29; *Hebr.* 9,26; 10,2.

²⁰ The same phenomenon appears in *1 Cor.* 7,14 where St. Paul says that ". . . the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the believing husband, *since then your children are unclean*. . . ." The italicized phrase is a literal translation of the Greek. All scholars, however, would translate, ". . . since in this case your children *would be unclean*."

²¹ In a continuation of his earlier article (cf. footnote No. 1) Zerwick attacks Audet's explanation both on grammatical and on contextual grounds. His arguments are weighty, but his final statement seems too harsh, "*. . . viz quidquam remanet, quod novam interpretationem Auctoris revera commendat.*" Cf. *VD* 37 (1959) 276-288.

²² *Art. cit.*, 329-342.

the message.²³ In Mary's case this problem involved a certain indisposition to the married state; she has somehow not completely resigned herself to the "prospect of *maternity-carnal knowledge*."²⁴ The angel's message does nothing to relieve this problem; rather, it intensifies it. Accepting Audet's grammatical explanation of 1, 34, Ceroke then paraphrases Mary's question, "How shall this (messianic maternity) happen, since (in this case—even while you tell me that it will be a fact) I do not know man (I cannot fit myself into a maternity that implies carnal knowledge)?"²⁵ Thus, in Audet's view, Mary supposed that the Messiah would be born of a virgin, a fact which conflicted with her present state of betrothal; in Ceroke's view, Mary supposed that the Messiah would be born in a normal way, a fact which conflicted with her own dispositions toward virginity.

With an even greater emphasis on the literary form involved, Muñoz Iglesias finds five elements in the Annunciation scene that have striking parallels to four other annunciations in the Old Testament and two in the New Testament.²⁶ The frequent agreement in wording, plus the following of the same order in all seven passages, convinces the author that we have to do with a literary form, and that the historical validity of the details cannot be presupposed. The question asked by Mary is one of these elements. Like its parallels in the Old Testament, it is inserted by the evangelist to emphasize the central thought of the message.²⁷ And this central thought is the supernatural and virginal conception of the Child. Hence the question posed by Mary (or really by Luke!) gives no indication

²³ *Art. cit.*, 334f.

²⁴ *Art. cit.*, 335.

²⁵ *Art. cit.*, *ibid.*

²⁶ S. Muñoz Iglesias, *El Evangelio de la Infancia en San Lucas y las infancias de los héroes bíblicos*, in *EstB* 17 (1958) 329-382.

²⁷ *Art. cit.*, 362.

of her own mind toward virginity at the time of the Annunciation.

Finally, mention can be made of an article by Alexander Jones in which the author revives the opinion of Cajetan already discussed by Flanagan.²⁸ Mary's reply can be paraphrased simply, "I am not in the married state."²⁹ This, the author is convinced, is the most natural explanation, and places the emphasis, not on Mary herself, but on "what surrounds her and what is within her."³⁰

What is to be said of these exegetical efforts? It seems to me that each has its weaknesses. Audet's explanation is somehow too sophisticated for the simple scene being described, especially in view of his attempt to attribute to Mary much of the subtle theological thinking involved. Moreover, while he has argued for a literary form on the basis of a comparison with *Jdg.* 6, 11-24, he would still accept the historical accuracy of most of the details.³¹

The greatest weakness of Ceroke's explanation is the meaning he gives to the phrase "I do not know man." While Audet's modification of the verb can be grammatically justified, the idea that it expresses some kind of inexplorable opposition to the married state, or uncertainty as to her dispositions toward it, seems difficult to accept. The comparatively simple grammar of the verse is made to bear a rather heavy exegetical burden.

Of all the explanations, that of Iglesias is the most logical. Having given his arguments for the existence of a literary form, he accepts it as such and makes no attempt to salvage historical data where there is no strict evidence for them. The principal objection to this hypothesis is that given by

²⁸ A. Jones, *Background of the Annunciation*, in *Script* 11 (1959) 65-81.

²⁹ *Art. cit.*, 80.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ This is essentially the objection of Zerwick, *art. cit.*, 278, and is the most telling point of his criticism.

Zerwick.³² Has the existence of this literary form been sufficiently established? Several of the elements alleged to make up the literary form of an annunciation admittedly constitute the natural development in a dialogue of this type.

This survey of recent opinions indicates that more and more scholars are giving greater attention to the literary analysis of the passage. That no unanimity has been achieved is due perhaps less to the invalidity of the method involved than to our still imperfect knowledge of the literary forms used by the ancient writers. While these explanations may, for some, take something away from the fullness of Mary's knowledge and dispositions at the time of the Annunciation, they do put greater stress on the fact of her virginity at the time of conception, since the sacred writer would, in this view, be taking special pains to emphasize that virginity. And if that was his intention, then that virginity must have played a prominent role in his theological thinking.

Matthew 19, 10-12

Few studies have been made of this pericope that are of some importance for our review. One of the most thorough is a fairly recent article by J. Blinzler on whom I have depended for much of this section.³³ Before examining the meaning of the passage we can discuss briefly its relationship to the immediate context and its origin. All would agree that it is an independent logion that has been artificially connected with the preceding passage dealing with divorce. Since both have a relationship to marriage, it is understandable that the inspired author should have chosen this as the best possible place for the insertion of this saying. Blinzler's reconstruction of the original form seems the most satisfactory.³⁴ V. 10 is a

³² *Art. cit.*, 284.

³³ J. Blinzler, "*Eisin eynoychoi*" *Zur Auslegung von Mt 19,12*, in *ZNTW* 28 (1957) 254-270.

³⁴ *Art. cit.*, 264-267.

transitional verse supplied by the author to form the connection with the preceding. V. 11, considered by many to be another creation of the author's to introduce the saying itself,³⁵ it rather to be seen as the actual words of Jesus, but originally coming as a conclusion after v. 12c. Since the author felt it was a good transition between vv. 10 and 12, he inserted it in its present place.³⁶ Then, since the logion now lacked a proper conclusion, he added v. 12d, influenced by the wording of v. 11.³⁷

Where did Matthew find this logion? Although some non-Catholic scholars, such as Grant, would only say that it probably came from some local tradition in the northern Palestinian or Syrian church,³⁸ there is every reason for accepting it as an authentic saying of Our Lord. The paradoxical nature of the verse attests to its Semitic origin,³⁹ and the rhythmic balancing of the lines suggests the "oral style" of the prophetic preachers.⁴⁰ The historical occasion of its utterance has been plausibly suggested by Blinzler to be a controversy with the Pharisees who had tauntingly referred to Jesus' followers as "eunuchs." This would explain why Our Lord would have used such a harsh word in referring to His own close disciples.⁴¹ And because of this harshness and of the general Jewish color-

³⁵ V.g., J. Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (4th ed., Regensburg, 1959) 279f.

³⁶ It is not perfectly in place here. It could, on first reading, be understood to refer to Our Lord's teaching on divorce, whereas the context indicates that it refers to the following v. 12.

³⁷ Justin's citation of the logion confirms this reconstruction. Cf. Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 267.

³⁸ F. C. Grant, *The Gospels: Their Origin and Their Growth* (New York, 1957) 146.

³⁹ L. Vaganay, *Le problème synoptique* (Tournai, 1954) 167; Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 259.

⁴⁰ L. Cerfaux, *The Four Gospels, An Historical Introduction* (London, 1960) 8f.

⁴¹ Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 268-270.

ing, both Mark and Luke would have omitted the logion in their Gospels intended for Gentile Christians.⁴²

In the interpretation of the passage the emphasis must be placed on the unusual word "eunuchs." It does not simply mean those who are unmarried for some reason or other, in which case the word *agamoi* would be expected.⁴³ Rather, the eunuch is one who is *unfit* for marriage, *incapable* of entering the married state. Since the third member of the verse is to be taken in a metaphorical sense, as all would agree, there is implied a force that is greater than the person involved⁴⁴ and to which he has freely⁴⁵ surrendered himself. That very surrender has *ipso facto* rendered him unfit for the married state. This overpowering force is, of course, the "kingdom of heaven," or Jesus Himself.⁴⁶ Just as elsewhere in the Gospels the kingdom is presented as the pearl of great price or the treasure that commands the total dedication of the one who would find it,⁴⁷ so, too, here is it presented as the "overpowering gift of God"⁴⁸ by which man can allow himself to be so completely absorbed that he is simply *incapable* of anything else. The celibacy, then, of this verse is not simply a voluntary renunciation of marriage, nor even an heroic offering of the individual, but rather the necessary and inescapable result of a total dedication to the kingdom.⁴⁹ Not everyone, of course, is capable of such a total dedication (v. 12d); it is a special gift of God (v. 11).

It is interesting that elsewhere Jesus does imply a volun-

⁴² Cf. Vaganay, *op. cit.*, 279.

⁴³ Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 257.

⁴⁴ Note that in the first two members of the verse the same is true.

⁴⁵ This is obvious from the words "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." This same phrase also indicates the metaphorical nature of this member of the verse in contradistinction to the other two members.

⁴⁶ Cf. Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 262.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Mk* 8,34; 10,21; *Mt* 10,37; etc. Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 263.

⁴⁸ Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 262.

⁴⁹ *Art. cit.*, 264.

tary renunciation of the married state for His sake.⁵⁰ It is generally admitted, however, that Our Lord is not positing two mutually exclusive situations i.e., love of one's family and love of Himself. It is, rather, a Semitic manner of expressing relative values. That they are not mutually exclusive is evident from the statement in *Mt.* 6, 33, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things shall be given you besides." This "seeking of the kingdom" *first*, or above all else, is the basic and necessary command for *every* Christian. In our present passage, on the other hand, Jesus is speaking of those who, by God's special grace, have committed themselves in a special and complete way. *This* commitment has, by its very nature, rendered them "eunuchs," i.e., unfit for marriage. The two are here mutually exclusive.

Blinzler also points out that Our Lord is referring to a specific group of men living at that time (the present *eisin*), who through an act performed once in the past (the Aorist *eynoyxisan*),⁵¹ have freely (*heaytoys*) made themselves unfit for marriage.⁵²

Thus we have in this pericope a startling statement about the relation of virginity to the apostolate. It is not seen as something desirable in itself, nor is it, in this case at least, something that man deliberately chooses. The choice is for the apostolate in a total sense; virginity is but its necessary consequence. There is no implication here of ascetical motiva-

⁵⁰ Cf. *Lk* 14,26; 18,29. The parallel passages in *Mt* and *Mk* do not have the word "wife." Cf. *Mt* 10,37; *Mk* 10,29. Blinzler (264) thinks that *Lk* himself has introduced the word, and this would be in accord with the evangelist's general tendency to emphasize the concept of Christian renunciation. Schmid (*op. cit.*, 185) says that *Lk's* rendering is *im ganzen* more original.

⁵¹ Kleist translates this, ". . . bar themselves from marrying," and says that "it is immaterial whether the aorist . . . is rendered by the present or the preterite." Cf. J. A. Kleist, S.J., *Eunuchs in the New Testament*, in *CBQ* 7 (1945) 447-449. It does, however, make a difference since, in Blinzler's understanding, Our Lord is referring to His own followers, whereas Kleist's rendering would give it the force of a general principle.

⁵² Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 261.

tion;⁵³ the kind of dedication involved has meant "to live and work for the kingdom of God."⁵⁴

Blinzler has suggested that the author of our canonical Gospel was influenced in his wording by the Pauline teaching which we shall consider shortly.⁵⁵ Whether this be true or not, it is worth noting that the passage occurs only in this "Church Gospel." It is quite probable that the inspired author had in mind, as he recorded the logion, the situation in the Christian community of the latter part of the first century, a community that had already developed a theology of virginity and that found among its members a number who lived this theology in their own dedicated lives. To both the theology and the practice the sacred writer here gives the necessary basis.⁵⁶

Acts 21, 9

On returning from his third missionary journey, Paul stopped at Caesarea on his way to Jerusalem. There, the author of Acts tells us, he went to the house of an evangelist named Philip. Luke is seemingly at pains to tell his readers that Philip had four daughters. And the reason for the inclusion of this notice (otherwise unnecessary for the story) could only have been because of the two characteristics that he adds: they were "virgins" and they "had the gift of prophecy." The implication is that both gifts were, in some special

⁵³ Cf. Schmid, *op. cit.*, 279.

⁵⁴ Blinzler, *art. cit.*, 270.

⁵⁵ *Art. cit.*, 267.

⁵⁶ Cf. D. M. Stanley, S.J., *Kingdom to Church, The Structural Development of Apostolic Christianity in the New Testament*, in *TS* 16 (1955) 1-29. In this article the author suggests that the parable of the ten virgins in *Mt* 25,1-13 is a probable reference to "groups of specially consecrated contemplatives" in the Christian community (27). Our own suggestion, as well as that of Father Stanley's, is based on the supposition that Matthew's Gospel has the two-fold purpose of presenting the teaching of Our Lord and its application to the Christian Church.

way, characteristic of the four daughters,⁵⁷ and that they were held in high enough esteem in the early Church to merit special notice. Thus we have evidence of both the practice of virginity in the primitive Church and of its high estimation.

Is it possible that in combining the two descriptions of the daughters the writer is also insinuating a connection between the two? In view of Paul's own thought on the matter, which he had expressed in a letter only a few years prior to this journey,⁵⁸ it is certainly possible that his disciple Luke would also have considered virginity a state of life better adapted to the work of the Lord. And it is this that he would have in mind when he refers to the two gifts. The verse, then, might be paraphrased, "He had four daughters who practised virginity that they might more effectively make use of the gift of prophecy."

1 Corinthians 7, 25-35

The most extensive passage on virginity in the New Testament is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The seventh chapter deals with questions concerning marriage and celibacy that had been proposed to him by his readers. Since his remarks are intended principally as a reply to these questions, we do not have a definitive treatise on the subject.

The opening verse of the chapter gives us a hint of the state of affairs in Corinth. Paul states that "It is good for man not to touch woman." The form of this reply suggests that the question had been asked whether marriage was advisable, and not whether it was allowed.⁵⁹ Obviously, certain of the Corinthians, repelled by the licentiousness for which their city was noted, were inclined to think that marriage was something evil in itself. It is well known that some of the pagan

⁵⁷ Cf. J. Renie, S.M., *Actes des Apôtres* (Paris, 1949) 288.

⁵⁸ Cf. *1 Cor.* 7, 34.

⁵⁹ Cf. A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1914) 132.

philosophers inculcated the practice of continence, either temporary or permanent, and it is not unlikely that some of the Christians of Corinth were influenced by these pagan ascetical concepts. Paul's words, then, are designed to place the matter on a wholly Christian level.

The first part of the chapter has to deal, in general, with the obligations of the married state for the Christian, although Paul makes fleeting references to the excellence of virginity (vv. 1.7.8). The unmarried state is dealt with more explicitly in vv. 25-38. (But even in this passage Paul is careful to repeat, in view of the Corinthians' concern, that marriage is not an evil in itself.) The essence of his message can be stated quite simply: virginity is the better state of life. There are, however, several points that can bear clarification, and that will have a significant bearing on the New Testament teaching on the subject.

The first of these is the relation of Paul's thought to the teaching of Jesus contained in *Mt.* 19, 12. Paul states unequivocally that he has no commandment of the Lord concerning virgins (v. 25).⁶⁰ Was he, then, not aware of the Matthean logion? Both Huby⁶¹ and Spicq⁶² suggest that Paul is giving a practical determination of the general counsel given by Our Lord. If he had been aware of it, however, it seems that he would have appealed to it at least as a basis for his own particular determination. This statement of Paul's, therefore, is an indication that the saying was not generally known to the Christians of this early period.⁶³

Of greater concern is the reason for Paul's declaration in

⁶⁰ The term used here, *parthenos*, generally refers only to unmarried girls. It may be that Paul had these principally in mind as he began this passage. But that he wishes to speak also of virginity in men is evident from vv. 27.32f.

⁶¹ Cf. J. Huby, S.J., *Saint Paul, Première épître aux Corinthiens* (Paris, 1946) 171.

⁶² Cf. C. Spicq, O.P., *Épîtres aux Corinthiens* (Paris, 1948) 220.

⁶³ If Luke, too, was unaware of this logion, he was not unaware of the significance of Christian virginity, as his reference in *Acts* 21,9 shows.

favor of virginity. In several places he states that it is good (*kalon*) for one to remain unmarried (vv. 1.8.26). Scholars would admit a comparative force here since the Semitic language does not have a comparative form, and Paul frequently expresses himself in Semitic thought patterns.⁶⁴ Hence we would understand that virginity is *better* than the married state. In either case it is said by some commentators that virginity is given an ethical value that stamps it as something good *in itself*.⁶⁵

It is difficult to sustain this in the light of the general context. In a recent and important study⁶⁶ it has been shown that the dominant note of Paul's teaching is its existential, eschatological character.⁶⁷ In other words, throughout this section we find two main emphases of the Apostle. One is on the actual situation of the Christian at the time of his calling to the Christian state—his relationship to the cosmos. It is this actual state in life that will determine the charism that he has in his new existence. ". . . As the Lord has allotted to each, as when God has called each, so let him walk . . ." (7, 17). ". . . The call to Christianity includes to a certain extent the human state of life as well. State in life and Baptism are merged in the case of an adult heathen or Jew, a married person or an unmarried person who accepts the faith. . . . The moment of becoming a believer was the deciding factor for the type of charism that each one possesses."⁶⁸

At the same time, there is emphasized the eschatological character that the Christ event has introduced into history. There is now only the press of time to its end, or better, to its completion in the Second Coming of Christ. The Christian,

⁶⁴ Cf. Spicq, *op. cit.*, 214.

⁶⁵ Spicq, *op. cit.*, 214 and 220.

⁶⁶ E. Neuhäusler, *Ruf Gottes und Stand des Christen. Bemerkungen zu 1 Kor 7*, in *BZ* 3 (1959) 43-60.

⁶⁷ Neuhäusler, *art. cit.*, 54.

⁶⁸ Neuhäusler, *art. cit.*, 59.

by the very fact of his accepting Christianity, has placed himself in this new eschatological situation. And he is wholly in it. And so when Paul says that it is good for man not to touch woman (v. 1; cf. vv. 8.26), this is not an absolute statement; it is conditioned by the present situation, i.e. "... because of the 'present distress' (v. 26), the 'tribulation of the flesh' (v. 28), and because 'the time is short' (v. 26), is it better to enter into no relationship. All of these expressions characterize the present as defined by the end. *Enestōsa anagkē* is the present distress. And for Paul there is no present period that does not lie under the threatening shadows of the One who is to come. *Anagkē* is for Paul the oppression that comes from sin, and the constraint that sin creates (1 Cor. 7, 9). Because there is no present that is not conditioned by the end, every distress of the present is a sign of the Parousia of the Lord which is ever present because it is ever pressing and oppressing. In this situation it is better not to change the existing relationships. If you are bound to a wife, do not seek to be freed; if you are single, do not seek a wife (1 Cor. 7, 27). Paul is not expressing moral indifference here. Rather his point of view is that every new relationship that is undertaken in this final period that is so filled with pressure will only lead to losing sight of the One who is to come. The expectation of the Christ who is to come to us and of the coming Kingdom, which condition that eschatological reservation expressly treated in 7, 29ff, determines every action of the believer in the cosmos."⁶⁹

Other commentators have also understood the expressions referred to above in the eschatological sense.⁷⁰ But they have failed to see this influence as permeating the whole of Paul's thought. Thus Huby says that the statement in v. 27 is not to be taken literally, but gives no further explanation.⁷¹ In

⁶⁹ Neuhäusler, *art. cit.*, 58f.

⁷⁰ V.g., Huby, *op. cit.*, 172-174; Spicq, *op. cit.*, 220.

⁷¹ Huby, *op. cit.*, 173.

the explanation proposed above it is clear why Paul should have made such a statement, concerned as he is with the conviction that history (and the present moment) has reached a decisive term that finds the Christian, at the time of his calling, in a definitive state of life. By his calling, that state of life now is oriented to the eschaton. Any change in his relationship to the world, in his existential condition, could endanger that orientation. Again, in his exegesis of vv. 32-34 Huby says that the thought of Paul emerges more clearly here with regard to the two states of marriage and celibacy. The latter is more conducive to the service of God.⁷² But this is not seen in the general eschatological context. According to the explanation proposed, virginity is better because it has a closer relationship to the eschaton toward which the celibate, together with all believers, is pressing. His virginal state at the time of his calling has placed him existentially already in the future where there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage. He has, by the very fact that he is free to be "concerned about the things of the Lord" (vv. 32.34), already anticipated the eschatological future.⁷³

This interpretation also clarifies the Pauline concept of Christian freedom with regard to the cosmos. Neuhäusler has shown that there are many parallels between the statements of Paul in c. 6 and c. 7. The Christian is free with respect to pagan law because, as one of the saints, he "will judge the cosmos" (6, 2). This does not mean, of course, that pagan law is in principle rejected. But the less the Christian can rely on it, and especially in his dealings with fellow-Christians (cf. 6, 6), the more completely has he placed himself within that eschatological state to which he was called. He enjoys the freedom of Christ. In the same way, the very state of life of the celibate has conditioned him more fully for that same

⁷² Huby, *op. cit.*, 177.

⁷³ Neuhäusler, *art. cit.*, 54f.

eschatological state. In the true eschatological present the cosmos no longer exists.⁷⁴

In the Pauline teaching, then, the value of virginity is placed solely and wholly within an eschatological framework. To say that Paul is influenced here only by his conception of the proximate coming of the Lord is to misunderstand his notion of the eschatological period. That period embraces "the ensemble of the messianic times from the Incarnation to the end of the world, and not only the terminal event of the Parousia. We are in the final age arrived at its fullness (*Gal.* 4, 4; *Eph.* 1, 10), in the definitive period of the redemption and of salvation. . . ." ⁷⁵ It is this Pauline conviction, regardless of the duration of that period as conceived by him, that has stamped his teaching regarding the value of *any* state of life which the believer may have.

It is in this same context that the passage immediately following (vv. 36-38) must be understood. Just what is the precise relationship between the man and "his virgin" referred to is hotly debated by the scholars,⁷⁶ but there is no doubt that Paul's mind is the same here with regard to the preservation of virginity as in the preceding passage.⁷⁷ This attitude, we think, must be attributed to his conviction regarding the present era of salvation history, an era whose meaning is influenced by the perfect realization that will come with the Parousia.

Does this eschatological note enter into the Matthean logion? There is every reason for believing that it does, even though the same note of urgency may not be present. It is Matthew who, of all the evangelists, has emphasized the im-

⁷⁴ Cf. Neuhäusler, *art. cit.*, 56.

⁷⁵ F. Amiot, *Les idées maîtresses de Saint Paul* (Paris, 1959) 238.

⁷⁶ For a discussion of some of the possibilities, cf. J. J. O'Rourke, *Hypotheses regarding 1 Corinthians 7, 36-38*, in *CBQ* 20 (1958) 292-298.

⁷⁷ Cf. v. 38, "Therefore both he who gives his virgin in marriage does well, and he who does not give her does better."

portance of the Kingdom of Heaven as realized concretely in the Christian Church.⁷⁸ The believer has entered into a kingdom whose definitive foundation has marked the end of the old world and the beginning of the new which will be climaxed by the Second Coming of the Lord. When Jesus, therefore, says that there are eunuchs who have made themselves such for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, this is understood by the inspired writer as indicating a celibate state within that society that now has only to prepare for the coming of her Lord. The eschatological element is implicit in the notion of the kingdom.

Luke, too, shares this conviction. What Matthew had attempted in his one work, i.e., to present the kingdom of heaven as effectively constituted by Jesus and concretely realized in the Church, Luke has accomplished in two volumes.⁷⁹ The first volume, that might be called the Book of the Kingdom Inaugurated, has emphasized the virgin birth within a definite eschatological framework. "The infancy of the Christ (is) the inauguration of the eschatological times."⁸⁰ The second volume, the Book of Acts, is Luke's description of the historical realization, and as such might be called the Book of the Kingdom Realized. Consequently, his brief reference to the virgin daughters of Philip can also be seen to reflect the same eschatological concern.

With this we see, then, that there is a point of contact between the concepts of virginity in the Qumran community and in the Christian Church of the New Testament period. While the former, to the extent that they practiced celibacy, saw this state of life as the only one conducive to the fighting of the eschatological war for which they were preparing themselves (and this note is already present in the Old Testament ideas of the "Holy War"), the latter saw it as a state of life

⁷⁸ Cf. Stanley, *art. cit.*

⁷⁹ Stanley, *art. cit.*, 28.

⁸⁰ Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 120.

that better corresponded to the eschatological period which had already been inaugurated. But rather than speak of an Essenian influence on Christian thought in this matter, it would seem better to say that a similar practice was suggested by the very nature of the age in which the two groups considered themselves living.

As a summary of what we have attempted here we might propose the framework of a biblical theology on Christian virginity. The first datum of such a theology must be the historical fact of the virgin birth and the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Mother and of her divine Son. The first evaluation of this Christian state of life is contained in the saying of Jesus. Here the present celibate state of some of His closest followers is said to be directly and inescapably connected with the messianic kingdom. In this statement we can find the doctrinal basis on which the Christian concept of virginity is founded. Then, either consciously following this teaching or acting in accord with what can be presumed to have been a Christian sense of values, the four daughters of Philip present us with a concrete example of what would become, if it had not already become, a Christian phenomenon. St. Paul, in his answer to the Corinthians, finds occasion to expatiate on the eschatological character of the Christian era, and, consequently, to make more explicit the relative value of the celibate state in this era. His disciple, Luke, fully aware of the Pauline eschatology, and writing at a time when any subsidiary note of a proximate fulfillment had been abandoned, has stressed the abiding force of the virginal state within the Christian community both by his emphasis of the virginity of the messianic Queen Mother and, to a lesser degree, of the four daughters of the evangelist Philip. Finally, the author of our canonical Matthew, probably writing at a time when the Christian community had already reached a highly developed stage in its growth toward full maturity, provided the

definitive theological basis to Christian virginity by "canonizing" the saying of Our Lord, and, at the same time, presented an example of this life of virginal dedication within the Church by his use of the parable of the virgin handmaidens of the Lord (*Mt.* 25, 1-13).

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