

# Dialogue – The Heart of Celibate Spirituality

By Fr. John Zvijak, C.P.P.S. & Fr. Joseph Hinders, C.P.P.S.

(Excerpted from 1981 May *Worldwide Family Spirit* magazine)

The authors are priests of the Society of the Precious Blood who teach at a minor seminary in Canton, Ohio. Being stationed together has enabled them to dialogue since their original Weekends in 1973.

Why should a Priest dialogue? Why should a religious dialogue? Oh, it's easy enough to see why a priest would dialogue if he's helping to give Weekends. He wouldn't want to ask others to do something that he doesn't do himself. He wouldn't want to be a hypocrite. But dialogue is mainly for couples, right? I mean, when you talk about strengthening relationships, surely the priestly and religious vocations are in relationship to the Church, but it's not the same. So dialogue is not very important for Sister, or Brother, or Father. It's great if they want to support couples by continuing to dialogue, but there really isn't much in it for them, right?

Wrong! It's true that a lot of the Weekend - especially "Matrimonial Spirituality" - applies only *mutatis mutandis* to the celibate. But we are convinced that dialogue fits close to the heart (where else?) of celibate spirituality. We can claim it for our own. It fits us. So maybe it's time we spoke up for dialogue and what we have to say for dialogue may also apply to couples. It certainly would apply to all of our single brothers and sisters among the laity.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY

An attitude that easily develops in the celibate life is the attitude of self-sufficiency. Celibacy is a beautiful gift in the Church. It's a special calling and requires a particular kind of dedication and sacrifice. Before we made our promise, we were trained and tested and judged mature. We are not lonely. We are fairly well-adjusted, and our lives are exciting and worthwhile since we live for others.

So where does self-sufficiency come in? It takes subtle shapes and forms. "I am tough. I can take care of myself. I am accountable for my prayer-life. I have high principles. My feelings are not important. I have to maintain my objectivity. People count on me." We hesitate to make strong personal ties because we are moved frequently. It is hard for us to be gracious receivers. When we admit that we need others, it is mostly for what they can do or give, rather than for who they are

What all of this points to is the need for dialogue. In dialogue, I cannot be self sufficient. I cannot dialogue alone, but must count on another. I become dependent. And it is not enough to be tolerant of another's feelings. I have to share that joy or hurt and make it my own. I don't have to defend my feelings, but must admit I have them. Dialogue seems a natural way for celibates to build community, calling as it does for trust and interdependence. At least it prevents us from entrenching ourselves in self-sufficiency.

## THE EQUALIZER

Related to the attitude of self-sufficiency is the attitude of professionalism. We religious and priests are well-educated and trained as teachers, administrators, chaplains, nurses, counselors, musicians, etc We want to be recognized as competent We have our contribution to make, and that is how we score points, achieve recognition, and maintain our self-esteem. Whether we admit it consciously or not, a lot of baggage in the form of superiority, doubt and professional jealousy accompanies this attitude.

What is so neat about dialogue is that it is a great "equalizer" In dialogue, it doesn't matter what I do or how smart I am All that's important is who I am or how I feel. Your feelings are no more important than mine, nor vice-versa. We don't dialogue to compete, but simply to know and accept one another. That takes the pressure off, and that's healthy!

## AFFIRMATION

There is another attitude fairly common among celibates, which we will call "nobodyism." Perhaps the label is not apt, so we'll add a description. These are very committed individuals. They are unassuming; unpretentious they are willing to bend, to it in, for the good of the group. They will take any job; do whatever is asked of them. Our diocesan and religious communities could not survive without them. They fit in so well that they are often taken for granted. Herein lies the danger.

If you asked these people, "Do you feel personally fulfilled?" they would smile at you. They don't consider their own feelings. Why make waves? The work must get done. Yet there is the lingering suspicion that their efforts go largely unrecognized. Although they might deny it, they DO have feelings.

Dialogue has so much to offer the "nobodies." Much has been written recently about "affirmation." We even have Houses of Affirmation for priests and religious. What is surprising is that the connection between dialogue and affirmation is not often made. In dialogue I am constantly told that I'm important. I'm unique. My feelings are the unique part of me, and it's "Okay," to feel the way I do. What could be more affirming than this? This is something more than "warm fuzzies." It is the solid recognition of my importance as an individual!

## DIVIDENDS FROM DIALOGUE

Has dialogue made a difference in our lives as priests? We believe so. Before, with a feeling of desperation, frustration, or a real blow to our self-esteem, there was nowhere to go except into disillusionment. Now there's a way out. Even disillusionment can lead to the joy of being understood as a person.

Dialogue makes life an adventure where we find new treasure. It's an ongoing discovery of who we are in God. It's kind of like the parable of the dragnet that collected all kinds of things. We can sort out the things that are really worthwhile. Sometimes it's a rediscovery of something overlooked' Statements, that were just statements before, become convictions.

No matter what the day has been like whether we're burdened or buoyant, it's good to be honest about it. At the very least, what we've said in our letters is that we love the Church that day. And for us' it's important to express that in some outward way'

Many of the key ideas from the Weekend are reinforced in dialogue, and these are the bonuses that make a difference in living How helpful it is to remember that "feelings are neither right nor wrong," when it seems more important to justify them than to share them. How helpful the saying can be when dealing with moody adolescents!

We have often kidded about, "Love is a decision," as if it meant "Bite the bullet!" But we've also found that when you say "yes" to something, you begin to care about it and work for it. A positive response puts love where there was nothing before, and you forget why you wanted to say "no" in the first place

#### OPENNESS TO THE CHURCH IS OPENNESS TO GOD"

I (Fr. Joe) used to dread saying Mass at the nursing home. It was dismal Then it dawned on me-these people have feelings too. I glanced around at the patient eyes, at the hands clutching old prayer books often written in German or Polish. These people could be my grandparents, yet how they respected me as a priest! How could I be so patronizing? I began to treasure their simple faith and hope and the time I spent with them. Many have moved on, and it's nice to know I have friends in heaven!

#### CHANGE!

Attitudes change. In recent years we've realized how strongly we feel about the Church. We recall blinking back tears when we heard that a Cardinal from behind the Iron Curtain had been elected Pope. We get choked up when we listen to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. We recognize the holiness of the Church in the love of people. There are so many people who don't make headlines, but who are gentle and generous and remind us of our parents We are constantly amazed at the deep spirituality of the laity It pains us more when we see young people drift from the beliefs of their parents in a sense, they haven't left the Church, but have never really recognized it.

Our attitude toward being priests has changed. If we ever had the idea that priesthood was a prestige or status thing that was a mistake. It is not static, or routine, because responding to a call keeps changing us. We are called to love the Church, not to take it for granted. Sure, what we do is important but never as important as who we're doing it for. Doing priestly work is not as important as belonging to the Church,

Sometimes we come to you tongue-tied and empty-handed and you assure us that our presence is as valuable to you as anything we could say or do. You just want your priest to BE THERE for you. We need the Church. We don't have it made. We need a love that challenges us as much as it supports us

This has affected our preaching. Feeling close to people makes it easier to preach. We are concerned about the homily, but the concern is more to nourish and strengthen our

people, rather than impress them with our capability The homily is a time to dwell on God's love-letter together, in the ways that it encourages and challenges us. It's an exciting time when we see the implications of God's dream for us. Loveletters have the power to transform life from something drab to something beautiful Love-letters should be read "once for the heart " Isn't that what believing is-taking them to heart?

#### DIALOGUE FOR DIALOGUE'S SAKE?

We have often asked ourselves whether the positive changes in our life are due to dialogue or to our involvement with people because of Marriage Encounter. The question makes no sense because these two things are inseparable. We have noticed that the couples with the "can do" spirit in their parishes and communities are the same ones who continue to dialogue.

Of course, it is possible to be involved and apostolic without dialogue. But then, is your service better because you don't dialogue? Does it flow from your sacrament, that is, your relationship? No one ever suggested dialogue just for the sake of doing it as a discipline. But the fruits of dialogue (giving, receiving, and understanding) have an effect on all that we do. That's what's important.

July 7, 1977, is a memorable date for us. At the time I (Fr John) felt a strain in my relationship to the Church and my religious community. I just felt hassled. We decided to write on the question, "Dialogue or die. HDIFAT?" That slogan was one of the zingers we remembered from the Weekend I began, "I really don't believe this," but as I continued to write, some of the strain I was feeling spread itself in writing on the page. As we talked about it, I knew I was painting myself into a corner. So I sort of backed into the conclusion: Relationship -caring about the Church and community-will grow stale and lifeless unless it is nurtured. Since that day in 1977 we have not omitted the "10 and 10."

We do not know what the future holds We go on, a day at a time We do know some things, though We know that tomorrow we will celebrate Mass, we will pray, and we will dialogue We thank God that we have been privileged to live as priests in this time of such support from married couples And we deeply care about our fellow priests and religious who share our commitment to the Church.

Besides dialogue questions from scripture, those pertaining to our Religious Community, and our personal relationship to the Church, we have found the following to be very helpful in growing in our love for God and the church.

On the Anniversary of Ordination- HDIFA my priesthood today?

God always supports our ministry with His special assistance of His mercy HDIFAT?

It is not the walk of life or the combination of companions that makes us better, but the victory over self-love HDIFAT?

What do I need most from Church? HDIFAT?

Time is one step away from eternity. HDIFAT?

HDIFA my contribution to the Church?

Do I find that I receive more than I give in my ministry? HDIFAT?

Do I feel an urgency to change the world? HDIFAT?

HDIF when I'm interrupted and I'm busy?

We are led by God's Spirit-"Be not afraid" HDIFAT?

HDIF when I'm lonely?

What is my strongest concern today? HDIFAT?

HDIF when I'm not physically well?

HDIF about taking a new assignment?

HDIF when plans are changed on me?

The Church needs me as a priest where do I see this and HDIFAT?

What am I most thankful for and HDIFAT?

HDIF right now about my future?

HDIF about daily Meditation?

Everybody brings to the world the message that God has not gotten tired of human beings HDIFAT?

God must want us to be encouraged He gave us His own Son to ease the fears we have HDIFAT?

Since the Word became flesh there is something very beautiful about being "only Human" HDIFAT?

HDIFA accepting gifts from others?

HDIF when I'm indecisive?

HDIF when someone in my family is really hurting?

When I judge I'm all alone in the world, HDIFAT?

HDIFA my relationship with God today?

What hinders me in creating peace and silence within myself? HDIFAT?

Do we really believe we are the hope of the future in the Church? HDIFAT?

HDIFA celibacy being a sign of hope for others and a sign that I love the Church?

HDIF when my mood affects relationship?

How do I feel when I get choked up and want to hide?

How do I feel knowing couples are living their Sacrament and supporting our Priesthood?

What do I value most in life and HDIFAT?

Christ is my and personal King! HDIFAT?

How do I feel when I'm stubborn?

How do I feel about my prayer life?

What is my ambition for God, or what am I anxious for God to accomplish?  
HDIFAT?

What is my attitude to the Blessed Virgin and HDIFAT?

Each day this year there is a special grace waiting for me HDIFAT?

I have nothing to give that I have not received HDIFAT?

Confidence means accepting our own goodness, HDIFAT?

How did my day go and HDIFAT?

How did I handle the Modern World this week HDIFAT?