

# Celibacy demands staking one's life on Christ

The final sentence in Father Joe Cote's obituary in The Baltimore Sun was quite poignant. It read simply: "He had no survivors."

When I read that sentence, I thought of a conversation about celibacy with the great Scripture scholar, Sulpician Father Ray Brown. In class one day, the topic of the witness of celibacy came up. As young men, we saw the witness as part of the cross, as giving up sexual pleasure. Father Brown noted that the witness was far more profound. It was giving up progeny.

He noted that, to an observant Jew, the first commandment in the Scriptures was not: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself." The first commandment in the Scriptures was: "Increase and multiply."

The idea of life after death was a fairly new concept in what we call the Old Testament. About 100 years before Christ, the concept of continued life after death was introduced. Prior to that, a good life was rewarded with a long life. To have lived a long life meant you were blessed by God.

Immortality, then, was not continued personal existence, but continued life through your children and their descendants. You lived on in your family, not in your person.

The witness of Jesus profoundly challenged that belief. He lived the life of a single person. That was an extraordinary challenge. One scholar who researched the field could not find a single rabbi in Jewish history who had not been married. The concept of having children was so sacred and so profound that the witness of a single life was contradictory to that.

The witness of celibacy is the witness of staking your life on Jesus. As Jesus proclaimed a faith in life after death, and as his personal resurrection confirmed that

belief, so celibacy reflects that belief. We believe that our immortality is not through our offspring, but rather a personal, continued life in eternity.

Father Cote gave that witness, and he witnessed so much more in his good humor, his great compassion and his priestly ministry.

For us, Lent is a time to call ourselves to conversion. Lent is a time in which we journey from ashes to Easter, from crucifixion to bliss, from death to life. The call during Lent to “die to ourselves” is not a call to “kill” ourselves or torture ourselves with penances. It is a time to do what Jesus did, to let our ego, our ‘little self’ die, with all its attachments and needs, and live for eternity, to live to our Higher Self.

Lent is not an easy journey. Living as a Christian is not easy. We live in a world that tells us to live for the “little self,” to indulge the ego with pleasures and distractions of every kind. We need the eternal witness of Jesus. And we need the witness of good people in every age and generation. Father Cote was one such person.

When I asked a religious sister what she thought Joe would say to us from heaven, she replied without hesitation: “He would say that it was all worth it!”

His life was not easy, but his faith was sure. Joe does not live on in any physical descendants, but he lives on in countless lives touched by his selfless love.