

LIFELONG SINGLE LIFE

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In the bygone days young people hardly chose to live lifelong single life. In the ordinary run of life young men and women found a life-partner and formed a family. Some religious minded young men and women found the fulfillment of their lives in choosing to live single in the religious life of a monk, a nun or of a priest.

In some societies there is no option for adult young men and women but to marry. In the Christian religion young persons can choose according to their inclination, a life of marriage or a lifelong single life of a priest, a nun or a monk in religious life.

By way of exception we see in all human societies a few people who choose to remain single without embracing the religious life of a monk or a nun. But during the last few decades what was an exception in the past has become a normal way of life. So today's youth look at the life of a spinster or a bachelor as an option to the life of marriage or the life of a religious monk or nun.

In the Bible according to the Gospel of Mathew some people to test Jesus Him: "Does our Law allow a man to divorce his wife for whatever reason he wishes? Jesus answered, 'Haven't you read the scripture that says that in the beginning the Creator made people male and female? And God said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one.' So they are no longer two, but one. Man must not separate, then, what God has joined together" (Mt.19, 3-6).

In the context of divorce after marriage Jesus teaches his disciples that, "For there are different reasons why men cannot marry: some, because they were born that way; others, because men made them that way; and others do not marry for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. Let him who can accept this teaching do so" (Mt 19,12).

I think that here Jesus has spoken of three types of people. First, the married people, second, the people who are incapable of marriage in their life and the people for one reason or other choose to remain single, and third, those men and women who choose to remain single for sake of the Kingdom of God.

In this essay we will speak about the third type of people. This type of people chooses to remain single for one reason or other. Unlike religious monks and nuns these people do not take the vows of poverty, obedience and virginity. Still their life resembles more the life of religious monks and nuns than those in married life. For, like the religious monks and nuns they remain single all their lives and lead a life of virginity.

When we speak of virginity, I am reminded of an event of bygone days. Once the King of Cochin was visiting for the first time the monastery of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate at Thevara, near Ernakulam. While looking around the monastery the king asked the Superior, "Reverent Father, here you all seem to be very happy and content. But where are your wives and children?"

“We are all virgins. We have no wives and children,” the superior of the monastery said.

“What? Men can also live that way?” the king exclaimed wondering about single life of virginity of the monks.

“On one’s strength a person cannot live a life of virginity but a person can live so with the special grace of God,” the superior explained to the king.

The life of virginity is like the lives of angels without body. But religious monks and nuns are people with bodies of flesh and bones. So they dedicate all their bodily, mental, intellectual and sexual energies to the service of God. In this life the religious monks and nuns are helped by their life of prayer, community living as well as their purpose of life.

There are men and women who live single lives of virginity without these helps of the religious. They live a life very different from the lives of the monks and nuns. Their lives are also dedicated for a purpose. They have their own particular purpose of life and they orient their lives and thoughts to suit the purpose.

Away from married life, those who live lifelong single lives have usually a very specific purpose of life. They are ready to spend all their energies and endure all difficulties in order to attain their purpose or aim of their lives. They work hard to get what they want.

The persons who embrace lifelong single life are well aware of all the benefits as well as the losses of such a life.

Those who choose a life of a spinster or of a bachelor, live alone or with a relative or in some institutions. They have chosen their independent life-style. But they do not have to follow a particular life-style like the monks or nuns.

Those who live single lives away from marriage and religious lives, have their own concrete aims. They spend their energies and powers in their chosen field. Our President Abdul Kalam is a good example. He has chosen to live single to dedicate his entire life for the service of the country in the field of science and research.

We have among us the persons who dedicate their entire lives to looking after their elderly parents or their brother or sister who is retarded or handicapped in other ways. They spend their time and energy to become expert and do their best in their chosen field of service in their lives.

The people who remain single for life, in a way experience complete freedom even though they also experience many limitations. In most cases they eat and sleep alone. So they often suffer loneliness and abandonment. Since they are spinsters or bachelors, they do not have the companionship often when they feel the need. Sometimes people look with suspicion at people who live single lives as spinsters or as bachelors. But most people look at them with respect and admiration.

In ancient Rome the responsibility of keeping the temple lamp burning in the Vestal Temple belonged to six virgins. They had to serve in the Vestal Temple from the age of 10 to 30. The Romans believed that these six Vestal Virgins protected Rome and brought the city prosperity. So the people of Rome gave them great respect. They were given prominent seats at sports stadia and drama halls. Special seats were reserved for them in public functions and places. If a criminal who was led to the place of execution, met a Vestal Virgin, the criminal was absolved of his crime by the sight of the Vestal Virgin and he was set free.

In our history there are many people who are very famous for their dedicated lives and services while remaining single. Classical poet Francis Thomson, the model nurse Florence Nightingale, the Founder of the American Red Cross, Clara Barton, etc are great examples.

In the Indian culture too those who lead dedicated single lives are loved and respected. The people appreciate their lives of prayer and commitment. Their steps are blessed like the steps of the Vestal Virgins of ancient