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Singular Christianity: Marriage and Singleness as Discipleship

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4

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If only Paul had not written chapter seven of his first letter to the Corinthians. Christians can fairly easily avoid questions about whether to be married or single when they stick to the Gospels, for Jesus does nothing clear-cut with respect to states of life. He is present at the wedding at Cana in John; in Matthew, he issues a prohibition against divorce; he speaks about being eunuchs for the Kingdom of God, and reconfigures family in his exhortation that the ones who are his disciples are his mother and brothers. Because Jesus does not appear to have much of a line one way or the other, the Gospels appear to allow us not to get too caught up in questions about whether to marry or whether to stay single.

Paul, though, does not let Christians off quite so easily. In verse eight he writes that for the unmarried and widows, it is "*good* for them if they remain as I do."[1] Later in the selection, Paul contrasts the married and the non-married by suggesting that the unmarried virgins can follow Christ, but people who are married are concerned with the world and with family.[2] Paul tempers these points by saying that it is better for people to marry than to be aflame with passion—in other words, do not

1. 1 Cor 7:8 (NAB). Various translations use the word "good" here; the New Revised Standard Version uses "well", which tends to decrease the force Paul has on this state of life.

2. 1 Cor 7:34.

strive for remaining unmarried if it will just cause you to sin. Most of the early church fathers interpreted this passage as suggesting that virginity is better, far better, than marriage. For example, John Chrysostom discusses how Paul has saved a thorough discussion of virginity for after he already has spoken about marriage relationships "with the hope that they have learned from his previous words to practice continence, and can now advance to greater things."[3]

Thus Paul's words seemingly set the stage for a debate like that between Jovinian and Jerome in the fourth century, where Jovinian suggested that state of life did not matter as much as some claimed, while Jerome saw marriage as sinful and consecrated virginity as clearly superior. Jovinian wrote, for example, that "our religion has devised a new dogma against nature . . . ," which is the ascetic life of virginity.[4]

One common way to tell the history has been that the elevation of consecrated virginity led to the later medieval sense that vowed celibates, particularly monastics, were holier and superior to those who were married. Protestant reformers questioned this stance, particularly Luther who famously rejected it in his treatise "The Estate of Marriage." Protestants have since tended not to think much about singleness, focusing on marriage as the norm for their adherents. For Catholics, however, it seems that this attitude continued into the twentieth century in various forms, such that Florence Caffrey Bourg is able to note that vocation manuals in the early twentieth century suggested that nuns could follow Jesus, while those who were getting married could not really be disciples.[5]

The force of these arguments shifted mid-twentieth century to focus on families as means for discipleship, and the document *Lumen Gentium* pinpointed that families could be a "domestic church." The latter part of the twentieth century has seen the rise of much literature on the importance of marriage, nuptial theology, and family, to the point that generic searches of literature show far, far more attention paid to marriage and family than to celibacy, virginity, and singleness. Since Vatican II and the document *Gaudium et Spes*, Catholics have become much more inclined to write about marriage and family while paying less attention to, or even maligning single states of life, especially the celibate priesthood.[6]

3. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 39.

4. Cited in Jerome, "Adversus Jovinianum," (*Patrologiae Latinae* 23, 282).

5. Bourg, *Where Two or Three are Gathered*, 6-7.

6. See, for example, Dennis Coday, "Panel Links Celibacy and Abuse." He writes: "A lay review panel in the Seattle archdiocese said the church's celibacy requirement

While Catholic theology has not wholly turned aside considerations of celibacy, the thrust of the conversation moves toward marriage. One might even go so far as to say that, in the common understanding, celibacy as a state of life has been found wanting and that the best state of life for happiness consists in marriage,[7] or at least, the semblance of marriage, which is perhaps a bit astounding given the rise in divorces since the 1960s.

So much for Paul's words. Yet, if Christians want to take Scripture seriously, there needs to be some accounting of Paul's words to the Corinthians. In addition, there needs to be some accounting for the fact that a very large minority of Christian adults is not currently married. The Pew Forum on Religion and Politics data suggest higher percentages of Christians are married than not (about 60 percent across all denominations); still, about forty percent of all adult Christians are unmarried in some variety (widowed, divorced, never married, cohabitating).[8] The cultural emphasis has become so much about marriage that Christians have neglected to think much about the nearly half of all Americans who are not, in fact, married.

Elsewhere, I have written about a single/married dichotomy in the church that I think ultimately leads to poor ecclesiology.[9] Somewhat ironically perhaps, in this essay I focus on singleness, not as a way to further dichotomize a church that needs no help with dichotomizing, but as a way toward understanding singleness, marriage, and the church rightly. The church needs *both* marriage and singleness to be the church, and married and single need each other in order to rightly understand their own lives. In this essay, I take that argument further, though, to suggest that in a way, what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ is to say that all Christians are married and all are single.

I suggest that a primary reason for the dichotomizing is that views of marriage, family, and singleness unhelpfully map on to heavily ingrained

for priests helped 'set the stage for the deviant behavior' of clergy sexual abuse. The 10-member Case Review Board said mandatory celibacy was a 'contributing factor' to the sexual abuse scandal by blurring distinctions between 'deviant or exploitative behavior and normal but unacceptable behavior.'"

7. For example, A Catholic Theological Society of America document, Kosnik et al., *Human Sexuality*, discusses human sexuality. Celibacy is not completely abandoned in this report, but still is given only three pages in a two-hundred-plus page document.

8. See Pew Forum, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey."

9. See Bennett, *Water is Thicker than Blood*.

cultural views and reinforce them. Contemporary culture names several versions of what it means to be single, and in various ways the church tends to support those views. Thus, the first section of this paper outlines some prominent cultural views of singleness, while the second section suggests ways in which Catholic theology substantiates cultural views. In the third section of this paper, I offer some ways of thinking about singleness that take Paul's words seriously (that singleness is a good) and that end up being rebellious against cultural constraints about marriage and single states of life. Christians can and should be radical witnesses against cultural views that are untruthful, and so I conclude with some possible ways forward for single and married Christians. My focus here is not with those singles who garner more of the focus—celibate priests and religious—though these are very important states of life that need good theological conversation. What I say here may be applicable to vowed celibacy, but my focus is instead with those—never married, divorced, or widowed—who rarely ever get discussed in terms of Christian vocation and discipleship.

THE BRIDGET JONES/"SEX IN THE CITY" VIEW OF SINGLENESS

Cultural icons suggest a lot about attitudes toward things, and for the purpose of discussing contemporary singleness, one of the more famous literary examples is from a popular novel by Helen Fielding. Fielding's book, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, originally emerged as a serial column in a newspaper and became a book and then a film. A sequel, *The Edge of Reason*, came out in both book and film formats, attesting to the ways in which Bridget has captured what it means to be single. Her "singletons," particularly her character Bridget Jones, provide excellent examples of cultural tensions surrounding marriage and singleness. Bridget Jones is a thirty-something unmarried woman and British, and her funny accounts of single life have attracted at least as much attention in the United States as they have across the pond.

What makes Bridget so attractive for followers of her adventures? Bridget wants to be a fabulous woman and show that she's smart, funny, and very adult—but Bridget is single, in and out of love, no steady boyfriends. This makes her the antithesis of what life should be, both on her married friends' views and her own. Many of her friends are now married and have at least one child. These friends once hung out with her

and were single themselves, but they have since become a class known as "smug marrieds." They are now the ones who are smart, funny, and sexy. Bridget can't be, because she's *single*. Thus the book and the film both showcase the tensions between being married and being single. In the film, for example, Bridget is invited to a dinner party with "lots of smug marrieds" (her term for those who are married). One of the couples asks her why there are so many unmarried women in their thirties these days, and Bridget replies, "Well, I suppose it doesn't help that underneath our clothing, our bodies are all covered in scales." The suggestion is that that maybe single people seem alien, with scales on their bodies. They look human, speak human languages, but do they really act human?

This sense of alienation is heightened when considering the beginning of the scene. Bridget walks into a dinner party where she is the one single guest among seven couples: the assumption at this dinner party is that normal equals married. And the divide between married and single at the dinner table implies that the vast majority of adults are, in fact, married couples. To heighten the sense of what is normal and abnormal, all seven couples show that they are part of a unity: they dress alike, talk at the same time, one couple cradles their yet unborn child. All of them have the same smiles plastered on their faces. By highlighting the similarities and ties between the couple, the scene also highlights the one person in the room who does not have those ties. Normal is unity with another person.

Some might look at the current array of media and suggest, on the contrary, that there is a shift in the ways people understand singleness—that being single is not only becoming less strange, it is becoming more desired. One example might be the hit TV show "Sex and the City", which depicted four successful women, successful in their own right and not because they were married. These four women also reveled in finding good sex partners and in enjoying the vastness of New York City, which caters to a single lifestyle. Being single, for "Sex and the City," means being hot, sexy, independent, and most of all, free to go and do things that their married friends cannot do. Other 1990s and 2000s shows might typify that same sense to some degree: "Friends," for example, was never primarily about married people with children, but about six young adults living (again) in New York City and finding that each other provided a kind of urban family of support that biological families did not.

What is interesting about these shows, however, is that even if we grant that singleness becomes normalized to an extent, the broader story lines still assume that people will get married, and eventually have children. That is the point toward which each of the women moves in "Sex and the City." The series may have begun with only Charlotte actively seeking marriage and family but by the end of the sixth season all four women are paired up, and by the final episode, Miranda has even bought a house for her burgeoning family of four in (gasp) Brooklyn. Miranda and her husband Steve treat their move to Brooklyn a bit like growing up. The City (i.e. Manhattan) was fine for when they were single and free, but now they have hard difficult choices that are fitting for mature adults.

These cultural icons thus depict both positive and negative images of singleness. On the one hand, singles are glamorized as able to have the best lives, or at least they can attempt to achieve dreams that people who are married with families cannot achieve. On the other hand, singles are depicted as not wanting to be single. The author of *Unhooked Generation: The Truth About Why We're Still Single*, Jilian Straus, proclaims these differences of perception as well, saying of her single friends: "These people have full lives—busy jobs, close friends, and passionate interests. Yet I couldn't help noticing that the topic of our failing relationships dominated almost every conversation."[10] Straus's own argument attempts to provide some conclusive (perhaps correct) ideas for why people remain single, including the notion that television and movies, as well as celebrity fanfare about marriages that ultimately do not last, form peoples' imaginations and visions of what it means to be single. The point, though, is that Straus, like all the media she decries, is pinpointing singleness as a problem and anomaly against a backdrop in which "everyone" gets married or should, particularly when she looks at her own Generation X in comparison with her parents' generation.

It becomes even clearer that something other than our experience is shaping the way we understand marriage and singleness when we look at demographic data. At the very least it is not the case that the vast majority of adult Americans are married. The 2006 data from the U.S. Census Bureau suggest that 47.3 percent of all adults are single in some variety (never married, divorced, separated, cohabitating, widowed). Moreover, looking at the data over the past century shows an interest-

10. Jilian Straus, "Excerpt from *Unhooked Generation*."

ing trend: the percentage of unmarried adults today is lower than it was between 1890 and 1910, and is about equal to the percentage of unmarried adults in the 1920s, 1930s, and is slightly above the percentages in 1940. In mid-century, there is a marked decrease in the percentage of unmarried adults to about 33 percent. Furthermore, there is a dip at the same time (1950s and 1960s) in the average age that men and women get married. Newspapers have made much recently about the current rising marriage age (now 25 for women and 26 for men), but such numbers are not new, at least for men. A century ago, the average age for getting married was 25 for men and 22 for women. In mid-century, the age dipped to 23 for men and 20 for women. Beginning in the 1970s and up to the present day, both the average age of marriage and the percentage of adults who are unmarried gradually increases again. There are numerous reasons for both the lowering and rising of marriage age and percentage of singles, and it would not be a fair historical argument to suggest that contemporary people are simply returning to patterns that their grandparents and great-grandparents had a century ago. What the data do call into question, however, is the idea that "everyone" gets married, by a certain age—the idea that "single" is just a brief stopping point on the way toward being married, or married again.

The cultural assumption goes beyond simply suggesting that the majority of people are married, however. It also presumes that staying single was a choice, and the wrong choice. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, other (married) characters admonish Bridget throughout the film, saying "You career girls can't wait forever, you know." Those thirty-somethings should have made better choices. *They* should have gotten married when they had the chance. But now they are thirty, and they are not really going to find anyone at all to whom they can be married.

Part of the notion that marriage is a choice goes hand in hand with the view that being married is simply part of adult life. If one is unmarried, one has not yet quite understood adulthood. Singles are depicted as going out drinking and having a good time; married people with children are depicted as paying bills and mowing the lawn. Thus, in *Single in a Married World*, several psychologists discuss what they see generally in their patients who are single—in particular, these psychologists see that their patients do not want to be single in part because it is perceived as childish and as lacking in responsibility. This perception leads, then, to

significant problems with depression, anxiety and the like.[11] *Adult* people make choices, and they make the right kind of choices.

The overall result is to suggest that single people are anomalies who can and should have fun, but who should eventually be married and enter the adult world. It is unsurprising that "Sex and the City" ended with all the women finding long-term partners, and with Miranda headed to the outer boroughs to pursue her now more "adult" family lifestyle. The City was fun while it lasted, but once the "singles" fun came to an end, time to pair up the main characters.

CATHOLIC MARRIAGE THEOLOGY

Catholic theologies perpetuate these cultural assumptions in the ways that theologians have tended to focus almost solely on marriage over singleness in recent years. Part of this is because of the dearth of discussion of marriage as a path toward holiness at all, as I noted above and the development of more positive theologies of marriage.

For example, discussion of marriage as a good has developed rapidly in the past few decades, particularly related to the "domestic church" and nuptial theology. Both of these have been developed in relation to the work of John Paul II. The "Domestic Church," a phrase linked to early church fathers, paved the way for serious reflection about ways in which families were wholeheartedly part of the church. The term did not immediately gain widespread usage; Florence Caffrey Bourg notes that it wasn't until John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation "On the Family" in 1980 that the term gained more import.[12] The pope's document exhorted families to "become what you are": a means by which people are formed in Christian faith and learn to practice discipleship.[13] "Domestic church" became seen as a way in which families could fulfill their lay vocation in part because they were building up the church at home through education of children and the like.

A second development came in the form of nuptial theology, which sees that the ultimate relationship between humanity and God is a nuptial relationship, partially revealed in the marriage relationship between

11. Natalie Schwartzberg et al., *Single in a Married World.*

12. Bourg, *Where Two or Three are Gathered*, 13.

13. *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 17.

husband and wife.[14] Eschatologically, the human marriage relationship would cease to exist in the face of the more profound marital relationship between Christ and the Church. In the present era, however, the nuptial relationship between husband and wife can witness to that final relationship. Nuptial theology was further developed by John Paul II in his weekly papal audiences between 1979 and 1983. These weekly talks later became known collectively as *Theology of the Body*. Theology of the Body has been popularized by Christopher West and is the significant underpinning for many diocesan programs about natural family planning and classes for engaged couples seeking to be married in the church. Nuptial theology is not limited to discussion of marriage and family; celibates are typically seen as the culminating example, in this life, of how relationships will be ordered in the next, precisely because they are not dependent on sexual love or present physical needs to live out their relationship with God.

The good that has come from both "domestic church" and "nuptial theology" has been widespread. Married couples and families have received a boost in terms of their identity as Christians within the church, and both theologies have deep roots in much patristic literature. These theologies have enabled those considering marriage to consider themselves as having a vocation, just as members of religious orders or those considering the priesthood have vocations. One of the main thrusts of the theology was to decrease the clericalization of the church, and pinpoint the ways in which lay people, too, were members of the Body of Christ and as such, responsible for tending God's Kingdom. Moreover, on the views of many who write about "domestic church," particularly Lisa Sowle Cahill, Florence Caffrey Bourg, and Julie Hanlon Rubio, the vocation of the family goes beyond divorce, cohabitation, abortion, and the use of birth control that often seem the exclusive focus of theologians discussing family relationships. In this new era of theology about families, familial vocation extends to social justice concerns.

Nonetheless, I contend that "domestic church" and "nuptial theology" both often perpetuate a dichotomy between married people and non-married, between celibate people but also between those singles who are part of households but are unmarried. For example, domestic church is most often linked to families, particularly parents and their children, as in John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio*. Vowed celibates have

14. See, for example, von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*.

little part in this, but non-vowed singles have none. Nuptial theology, too, tends to be discussed in terms of sex, contraception, and bodies, and therefore, married couples. Though nuptial theology ultimately is tied to celibacy as the ultimate nuptial relationship with Christ, singles lack context for understanding their bodies outside of sexual relationships and "total self-giving," and marital relationships are seen as lesser relationships than the celibate ones, further widening a split between the two.

This dichotomy is further heightened by a sense that in the church, too, it is adults who make choices about states of life. States of life are either marriage or vowed religious life. Some people do choose to be single, some in religious life as priests, monks, and nuns. Some make that choice but remain as non-vowed lay people, like Shane Claiborne and others involved in the New Monasticism project.[15] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* maintains that it is the duty and responsibility of every Christian that "when they become adults, children have the right and duty to *choose their profession and state of life*."[16] While I do think people have the responsibility to question whether they are perhaps avoiding a vocation to religious life or marriage, the tie of adulthood to choosing state of life leaves a quandary for serious Christians. Vocation, if it to be seen truly as a call from God, is not something that can be chosen in the same way that one chooses from among different brands in a grocery store, but that is the way that the current "market" for marriage and even religious life is set up. We advertise ourselves and even our religious communities in online dating ads and religious vocation magazine ads, in the hopes that someone might actually choose my "brand" over that other one.

For many, singleness is not a choice in that way, and the surrounding hype about marriage makes it a serious problem for them. One woman writes:

> I feel that maybe 99% of single people don't feel "called" to be single. They just are. Whether it's the environment we live in . . . or just our bodies . . . or it's how God is . . . most people feel called to be married. But, the problem is . . . you can feel called to be married and still never find the right guy. This is what I deem to be the problem with calling singleness a "vocation." Many times,

15. See www.newmonasticism.org. See also Shane Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution.*

16. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2230. Emphasis in text.

> I think you just feel like you're stuck there. A sort of purgatory. Until you either meet the right guy . . . or feel like you are being called to remain single.[17]

This person felt as though she was in a personal purgatory of sorts because she was single and not by choice. What does a person do when no vocation has presented itself? What if someone thinks they are called to be married but haven't found someone to marry?

The prevailing assumption by both theologies appears to be that a person either has a vocation for a vowed celibate life, or a vocation for a familial life (variously configured). The church appears to be built on these two pillars. The term "domestic church" cements a view that marriage and family are linked to the church in a close bond, in ways that non-vowed singleness cannot be. Yet living a good Christian life, being part of the Body, no matter what state of life we are in, is something that all Christians are called to do. "Domestic church" as it is discussed, however, causes us to think, not in terms of the Christian life as a whole or the Body of Christ as a whole, but of the subset of parts. This is detrimental both to helping married people understand marriage as a vocation (because it doesn't as readily become linked to Christian vocation) and also to those people who are not married, whether by choice or by chance.

The lack of attention given to the status of the non-vowed laity makes sense in historical context. The rise in divorce rates in the 1960s and 1970s (followed by a leveling off, rather than a decrease in divorce), combined with the rise in average age for marriage, and combined with the fact that many of those who are in their early and mid-twenties who have waited to marry are also no longer living at home, or even in the same state, means that there has been a rather stark demographic shift in the numbers of single people unconnected to families in a traditional sense.[18] Compared to the pre-Vatican II frame of reference, in which the normal state of life for most Americans, married or not, was to be connected to one's family, this demographic shift directs some new theological questions. Much theological energy has been on putting

17. Personal correspondence, September 5, 2008.

18. If anything, the numbers become much starker for Protestant theologians, since it has been far more normalized for Protestant Christians to be married. Most of the early Protestant reformers, for example, advocated that all Christians seek after the married state of life. See John Witte Jr. "Marriage Contracts."

back together some version of the family as it apparently existed prior to the "divorce revolution" and the "sexual revolution."[19] So much attention has been focused to this question, in fact, that very little thought has gone toward other states of life. The result is, as in secular culture, to see marriage and family as normal, more normal than being single, for non-vowed singles.[20]

An important question to ask, then, is how "singleness" fits with ecclesiology. Both "domestic church" and nuptial theology relate to particular ecclesiologies, which do not always adequately account or allow for what some have called the "non-vowed form of the lay state" but the increasing numbers of people who find themselves not led toward any particular vocation at the moment, plus the numbers of people who are divorced, widowed, or find themselves otherwise in the "single" category deserve greater attention in the twenty-first century.[21]

Is all this theological pressure really what Christians are called to do? I fear that for many, being single and Christian means that one has a vocation to find the right person to marry. (With the small caveat that in the relatively unlikely event you are called to a religious vocation, go out and find that.) No wonder people want to get married! Yet still, Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and indeed, the centuries of Christian tradition and witness toward other non-married states of life, should press theologians to ask how to think about singleness alongside marriage. "Domestic church" and "nuptial theology" may still be good views from which to understand singleness, but not as they are commonly discussed.

THAT SINGULAR VOCATION

Paul wrote before monasticism was ever an official state of life, so Patricia Sullivan notes that Paul's own singleness was a form of secular, non-vowed singleness.[22] Single and married appear separate to the extent that

19. For example, the Marriage, Family and Culture project, an ecumenical group of theologians, politicians, political scientists and others, has been on the more liberal end of the spectrum, trying to address the problem of lack of marriage in American society and elsewhere.

20. I should note that this is probably even more so the case for vowed celibates, whose state has been quite a bit damaged by the clergy sexual abuse scandal in 2002, even though the church is officially highly supportive of vowed celibate states of life.

21. See Sullivan, "Non-vowed Form."

22. Sullivan, "Non-vowed Form."

there seems to be an us/them divide today, but though Paul advocates for his own state of life, he is decidedly not trying to close off the option to marry. In fact, in the context of the whole, the passage seems to be less about choosing a state of life than it is about not letting any one particular state of life get in the way of the primary vocation of the Christian:

> However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything.[23]

Paul continues by speaking similarly about other states, including marriage and virginity, but also mourning and rejoicing.

Scholars might suggest that Paul's admonitions are quite shortsighted here, because he believes that the Second Coming will happen *very soon*. (As he writes in verse 29: "the appointed time has grown short." And later in verse 30: "For the present form of this world is passing away.") Yet regardless of when Paul thinks the Second Coming will happen (and remember that he does not know precisely when that will be) he still believes that states of life need to be regarded with respect to eschatology. People must live as though they were not married, not mourning, not rejoicing—not because those things are bad, but because those things are not permanent. The Christian's life is always contingent and not ultimate. States of life are gifts (1 Cor 7:7) that we have that might enable us to follow Christ better, or indeed, come to know Christ at all. Thus Paul can say: "Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife" (1 Cor 7:16).

When Paul speaks of "the call," moreover, he seems to be referring to the point at which people were called to follow Christ. For Paul, that call comes linked to baptism. In his letter to the Ephesians, he writes:

> I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called

23. 1 Cor 7:17–20. All quotations in this section are from the NRSV.

> to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:1–6)

As in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul here links call not with specific states but with gifts given. "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:11–13).

Each of us at our baptisms was recognized as an individual who dedicated his or her life to God. Each of us received our vocation. As *Gaudium et spes* says, "[The lay faithful] are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetical, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world."[24] We each *in our own way* were made sharers in Christ's own life and mission.

Which is to say, at heart, *all* Christians are single. We begin our Christian lives, in part, from singleness, from the fact that we are individuals with unique gifts. This is moreover part of the way that we Christians should be giving witness to an alternative message than the world gives. Christians are not, by *default*, married as a state of life. Single is the default of what it means to be Christian. Paul intimates this when he suggests that those who are married should live as though they are not. This Christian life of singleness, though, is marked by very different characteristics than the narrative contemporary culture offers about singleness. This is not a life that involves constant seeking of a new partner, but a life that involves putting down roots in the community in which one has been baptized.

That point leads to my second claim: we also begin our Christian lives, in part, in community, as those who are married. This is, indeed, part of what nuptial theology offers for Christians, but which gets obscured in the overall discussion. As part of the church, all Christians are married to Christ, and moreover all Christians have become part of

24. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 30.

a new family. In one of Augustine's sermon, written on the occasion of Easter baptisms, he suggests of those baptized:

> A short while ago they were called "Askers"; now they're called "Infants." They were called askers because they were agitating their other's womb, asking to be born. They are called infants because they have just now been born to Christ, having previously been born to the world.[25]

The ones who were previously baptized are their parents and they bear the responsibility to raise them and teach them and love them similar to how parents raise and love and care for biological children.

Saying that all are single and all are married in this way serves to highlight the strangeness of the call that Christians have, and the radical witness Christians make to the world about the nature of marriage, singleness, and all the related activities like dating and hooking up. Christ has come and has brought about a very different vision of what marriage and family means, and even what it means to be single.

At the same time, my suggestion that all are single and all are married in this way does not collapse vocation or states of life into broad general categories that become ultimately meaningless. Paul suggests states of life are gifts, and so when it comes to living a particular state, it becomes not a necessity (in the way that marriage so often seems today) but a contingent blessing. States of life do, in fact, mark the ways in which individual Christians live. Individual states of life point toward the full vocation of Christians in the Body of Christ. So, for example, someone who is single and childless might consider that still, she is a "parent" and might offer to teach catechetical classes, which often get taught by biological parents of children.

On the other hand, those states of life cannot become an excuse not to use other gifts that God has given for use in one's "call" as a Christian. For example, those who are single often observe that people expect them to do so much more because they are single and therefore appear to have more time. It is true that people who are married, particularly with children, will find their time truncated. Taking Paul's words seriously, however, suggests that even those who are married with children should consider that still, God might be asking them to use their gifts in ways that get pushed onto those who are single. One example might be medi-

25. Augustine, "Sermon 228," §1.

cal missionary work, which has been successfully negotiated by families, but which (especially for Catholics) often is presumed to be the purview of single people.

In theological accounts, then, there should be neither an elite class in the form of monks and celibates, nor an elite class in the form of married people with families. Single Christians are therefore adults, though not necessarily choosers of the state of life God has given to them at this particular moment. The choice comes instead in determining whether one will follow Christ and live this state of life as a gift now (even if in the future, marriage might well be a possibility), or whether the option taken will be conforming to cultural assumptions about marriage that run counter to Christian witness. The overabundant focus on marriage that "domestic church" and nuptial theology offer is rightly tempered by recognition that states of life are gifts toward living out the one vocational call that we all have.

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