

Manresa Link, 15th September 2018

Intimacy, Boundaries, Skills, Healthy Relationships

Case studies

Wise saying: "*All stories are true. Some of them actually happened*".

Underline what you think are important words/phrases in each story.

For discussion:

What would you ask or say to the person in this story if they came to talk to you?

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

1. A member of the Baptism team in my parish says s/he has fallen in love with me. I am not in love with him/her. I am also on the Baptism team; we meet every two weeks. S/he says s/he can't live without me. Should I leave the team? What to do?
2. I began to look at certain pornographic websites on my phone. I am spending a few hours doing this two or three times a week without realizing that the time passes so quickly. I get aroused sexually and masturbate. The pictures I have seen keep coming back to me even during Mass and prayer.
3. Robert/a: I know that I'm not responsible for my every thought and idea, but I worry about the sexual fantasies, which come into my head, particularly when I am praying. Sometimes, when I am trying to do some imaginative prayer, amazing fantasies come into my head, and before I know where I am, I have strong sexual feelings. It worries me. These are explicit sexual fantasies, and they hit me very hard: how do I reconcile this with what I am trying to live out as a chaste person? Is this the real me, and is all the rest play-acting?
4. A friend tells you s/he was in Amsterdam for a break and saw a member of your family/community coming out of a sex theatre with some friends. What to do?
5. You get a phone call to say that a member of your family/community is active on a dating site under an assumed name. S/he was recognized by the photograph. If you do not take action, the caller will go to the newspaper or the bishop and make a report.
6. You are at an international religious gathering. Young religious are helping with the practical organization. One afternoon, you are going for a cup of coffee, and as you come around the corner, you see coming towards you two young religious, (male and/or female) holding hands and laughing together. When they see you, they quickly stop holding hands. Should you do or say anything?

Tom and Sheila's story:

"I've been a priest for twenty years now: I don't suppose I am a very good one, but I know that I am a lot better priest as a result of my relationship with Sheila than I would be otherwise. We are not very unusual, Sheila and I: we know of at least two other priests who have lovers in my own diocese. It's all very discreet. But we are lovers: we weren't for a long time, because we both took, and continue to take, the matter of priestly celibacy pretty seriously, but it slowly became obvious that we both wanted to sleep with each other, and that our relationship had reached a point of commitment where this made sense, was 'inevitable and natural'.

How do I fit this in with being a priest? Well, I'm certainly a better priest than I was, if you measure this in terms of compassion and openness to others. And you don't have to take my word for it: a number of people who have known me in the various parishes where I have worked say just that, quite without knowing what has made the difference. I took on celibacy as part of a package: I knew God wanted me to be a priest, and I knew in formation that I was not going to find it easy to live celibate, but I was sure that if God wanted me as a priest, then he would help me live as a priest: and he has! Sheila and I meet up regularly: my community are very amused by the devotion I show to the weekly clergy golf match, but they have never worked out how long I spend on the course and how long with Sheila at her house outside the town. It's one day of domesticity, really: apart from our holidays, which we take together most times, it's the only time we get with each other. But it's enough, though sometimes we think about moving in together.

I know our relationship isn't within the rules of celibacy, but not everybody has kept the rules. I know what I am capable of, and what I am not capable of: I cannot live without an active intimate relationship, and neither can Sheila. No-one gets hurt by our relationship, because it only involves the two of us. In fact, lots of people gain, because of the beneficial effect it has on my priesthood and ministry. I look around at some of the old bachelors in my community, and I find myself thinking that they would be much the better off - as priests as well as human beings - if they had a lover. And I look at the priests whose live-in housekeepers are more than just that, and I say to myself "what's so different about Sheila's and my arrangement?"

What about my prayer-life? That, too, has been helped by Sheila. We pray the office together when we meet, and when we are on holiday it is a regular feature of our day. But more than that, loving Sheila has taught me how to get outside my own preoccupations and self-concerns, and that really has changed me. I'm not a romantic but I know what moves me and how I grow, and my relationship with Sheila has brought me closer to the Lord.