



From the  
Editor ...

# A life of relationships

“Lord, do You want me to be celibate?” cried Stuart as he sought to find how God wanted him to spend the rest of his life.

“I WAS always the sort of person who had a girlfriend. I always needed one,” said Stuart as he looked back on his teenage years. “Peer pressure was strong - drugs, girls and having sex at an early age.”

Surprisingly, although smoking drugs, Stuart Patnell managed to do well at school and landed a place at Warwick University. He soon made friends with a Christian who lived on his corridor and “missed a whole term of lectures talking to him about God!” he joked. Eventually his barrage of unbelief and questionings broke down and he gave his life to God.

The morning after, he was powerfully baptised in the Holy Spirit as he lay in bed. He found himself laughing and then crying for joy. “God came into the room and then He came into me. I was loving God from the bottom of my heart. It got so intense and I was so exhausted that I had to say, ‘God You’re going to have to stop this.’ But it was heaven on earth.”

During his third year, Stuart met up with some Christians from the Jesus Fellowship who had a regular Bible study and fellowship event called ‘Kingdom seekers’. On one of these occasions a celibate from the Jesus Fellowship was invited to share about her choice of celibacy. As Stuart listened he felt deeply moved as he sensed the purity of life that stemmed from such a gift. “Lots of my past had been to do with impurity and finding girlfriends all the time,” he said. “Seeing someone married to God was awesome.” He found he was “developing a passion for celibacy”, although he didn’t think it was particularly for him. He longed for a heart that was totally surrendered to God.

A few months later, as Stuart lay on his bed, he had a strange sense of God’s arm coming through the ceiling. In His hand was the gift of celibacy. “Do you want it?” God was asking. “I wanted to take it but I was scared,” Stuart reflected.

Meanwhile Stuart fell in love with a girl at his college Christian Union and again this caused him to think about celibacy. “One day I was worshipping. I couldn’t focus on God as her face kept appearing in my mind’s eye. I



Stuart has found a freedom in celibacy to serve the church and nurture spiritual children

made a decision to lay aside all my feelings about her and chose God. A giant weight lifted off me and I was free. I was just loving God and thought ‘if this is like what it is to chose God before a woman - what will it be like if I chose it all the time? That would be celibacy!’”

Stuart felt God say to him, “You can decide, you can chose. If you marry, I’ll use you powerfully. If you are celibate, I’ll use you powerfully.” He then sensed God saying: “I can use you more if you are celibate.”

Stuart spent a year testing his calling as a celibate and just before his twenty fifth birthday he made a vow of lifelong celibacy.

“Celibacy”, said Stuart, “is not a life of singleness - it’s a life of relationships.” He added, “It’s a force to be reckoned with when a married couple and a celibate are committed to one another for the sake of the church.”

Stuart spoke of the what he called “the pendulum of celibacy”. On the one side is intimacy with God, a deep union with Him, a life set free from earthly ties to seek God. The other side is the freedom celibacy brings to serve the church and to nurture spiritual sons and daughters. For Stuart, serving and loving God come first and activity springs from that.

Jesus spoke of celibacy: “The one who can accept this, should accept it.” (Matthew 19:11-12). To Stuart the meaning of these words is clear: “If you can, do it!”

## Generosity

I RECENTLY read an article on the Internet which focused on the value of celibacy as a calling in the church\*. The writer was interviewing a member of a Baptist church who had made a commitment to celibacy - much to the writer’s surprise. His conclusion was interesting:

“My friend, the Baptist layman who made me aware of the celibate calling, believes that ‘the quality of our relationships in marriage and in Christian community is intended to demonstrate the power of Christ to the world.’ He says that ‘such quality relationships require self-denial, which is directly contrary to the self-indulgent, immediate-physical-gratification philosophy of our society. The ‘lust of the flesh’ is a great enemy of quality relationships in marriage and in community.”

A key feature of celibates should be their generosity - selflessly pouring out themselves in giving quality time, commitment and service to others. Celibates are available for the many, rather than for one special relationship and have a large capacity to release love into the church, build friendships and bring that much needed quality of brotherhood.

The call for this sacrificial building love has never been more needed than today.

Huw Lewis

\* [www.christianweek.org/stories/vol10no21/editor.htm](http://www.christianweek.org/stories/vol10no21/editor.htm)

## 'The servant of servants'

IN THE thirteenth century the little known town of Assisi in Italy was the centre of one of the most radical movements the Church has ever yet known. Francis, (1181-1228), the son of a rich merchant of Assisi, had given all that he had to the poor and embraced a life of celibacy, simplicity and compassion for others. At first he was persecuted for going to such extremes, but soon people flocked to him to join the radical movement he had begun.

Twelve years his junior, Clare was growing up in the town of Assisi and watched him from a distance with admiration. Like Francis, she came from a well-to-do family. From an early age she loved God and longed, when she was older, to be celibate. When her parents talked to her about an arranged marriage, she was adamant! She did not want to get married!

She longed to meet Francis and eventually persuaded an older Christian woman to take her to see him. As she eagerly stood before him begging his advice, Francis talked to her about turning away from the ways of this world and living for God. There and then she decided that she, too, would leave her wealth and lead a simple, celibate lifestyle.

When she was eighteen, she ran away under cover of darkness and met Francis at the door of the church near where he and his brothers lived, a mile out of town. She took off the clothes of a rich young heiress and Francis cut off her hair and gave her his own garment of sackcloth that she put on with a simple cord tied around her waist. Francis then took her to a local Benedictine order of nuns where she became a novice.

When they found out that she had run away, Clare's family found her out and tried to make her change her mind. Such a life of simplicity and self-denial would disgrace the whole family, they said. Uncovering her shorn head, she told them that Jesus had called her to

His service and she wanted to be a celibate. The more they continued to dissuade her, the more she knew that God would strengthen her in what she had decided. Later her mother and two sisters both joined her - and several aristocratic women.

Francis' first followers were men. When women wanted to join the movement he chose Clare, though still young, as its leader. Like Francis, she lived and led others into a lifestyle of simplicity, humility and love for others. One historian writes of her: "Though superior, she would never allow herself any privilege or distinction. It was her highest ambition to be the servant of servants, always beneath all, washing the feet of the lay-sisters, and kissing them when they returned

from begging, serving at table, attending the sick and removing the most loathsome filth."

When her father died, Clare inherited a large fortune. She gave it all to the poor and would

**'There is nothing unbearable to a heart that loves God, but to him that does not love, everything is unbearable'**

not even allow it to be used by her own order. She always believed that her community should be dependent on God for everything - and again and again God provided for their needs for they found they always had just enough.

Under her leadership and Francis' oversight, Clare's community flourished and had many daughter communities. Although suffering ill health for the last twenty-eight years of her life, she said: "There is nothing unbearable to a heart that loves God, but to him that does not love, everything is unbearable."

As she lay dying, some of her spiritual children came to see her and wept together as they surrounded her bed. As she comforted them she tenderly encouraged them to be faithful in following the simple, trusting lifestyle God had led them into.

The order Clare founded, known as the 'Poor Clares', still exists today in 76 countries and numbers 20,000. They continue to practice celibacy and the same simple lifestyle.

## Book Review

***The Celibacy Myth: Loving for Life* by Charles Gallagher and Thomas Vandenberg**

THIS BOOK, written by two Catholic priests, has an important message: celibacy is not a private affair between an individual and God - it is God's gift for the Church. A celibate is given over to the Church in a special way. Celibacy can only thrive through relationships - with God and with others. If the Church's central focus ceases to be relationships, then celibacy will lose its power and meaning. "Of its nature, celibacy is not meant to be lived out in private. It is a call to a relationship." Celibacy is not a privation, but a privilege and celibacy only becomes a burden when celibates cease giving themselves to loving others. Celibates need a love relationship - with the people of God. Celibacy is "a way of loving for life."

This is a great book for both marrieds and celibates as both states are seen as mutually supportive and needed for church building. Both are God's gift for the Church.

You'll find plenty of inspiration in this book - and practical application, too. One important piece of advice that's given is: "When discouragement is high and self-esteem is low - give yourself to loving!"

## Celibacy and the Jesus Fellowship

CELIBACY is a gift and calling spoken of by Jesus (*Matthew 19:12*) and recommended by Paul (*1 Corinthians 7:25-35*).

Around 300 men and women in the Jesus Fellowship nationwide have made the choice of staying single. They include single parents, the divorced, widows and widowers as well as single people of all ages and sexual orientations.

For info/help please contact:  
Jesus Fellowship Central  
Offices, Nether Heyford,  
Northampton NN7 3LB, UK  
Tel: (01327) 349991  
[www.jesus.org.uk](http://www.jesus.org.uk)  
email: [info@jesus.org.uk](mailto:info@jesus.org.uk)  
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**Seven Silver Rings**  
Seven celibates from the Jesus Fellowship tell their stories



# Seven Silver Rings

The accounts of seven celibates from the Jesus Fellowship who tell their stories with passion, humour and courage

Info: Jesus People Shop,  
Nether Heyford,  
Northampton NN7 3LB, UK Tel:  
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[www.jesus.org.uk/books](http://www.jesus.org.uk/books)

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