



The Choice of a Lifetime

When Caleb Cunningham stepped forward to be ordained deacon on 25 June, I thought back 29 years to the day when I did the same.

Standing in the vestibule with the Archbishop before Mass, I felt like a groom about to walk in to meet his bride at the altar. That's when it hit me: the next time I stood in that spot two hours later I'd be a changed man—changed forever. Like a bridegroom I would go into the church uncommitted and come out committed. A groom entrusts himself to his bride; I would pledge myself to the Lord.

Married and celibate walk different life paths, of course, but both set out from the same dramatic starting point: their sacred public promise before the ever-faithful God. This moment in the ceremony marks the turning point of their lives. The groom vows to his bride, "I promise to be true to you"; and she echoes his words back to him. On the deacon's day of promise he answers "I do" to the question put to him by the bishop before the people: "Do you resolve . . . to remain celibate for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven?"

All three exit the church bound to a life-long promise of fidelity—the spouses to each other, the deacon to the Church. All three exit in the company of an Invisible Guide—the God Who promises His People again and again, "I will be with you."

Husband and wife live out their promise in a life "overflowing for God" in their children. But when Caleb Cunningham said "yes" to celibacy on 25 June, he surrendered his freedom to form a one-flesh union as husband and father. He resolved to live a life "empty for God" for the rest of his days, trusting that the Christ Who called him will fill his emptiness with friendship—friendship with God, with his fellow priests, with the people he serves.

Deep within the heart of every human being lies a longing to know and be known that none but God can satisfy, the God-Man Jesus Christ Who calls us His "friends." A celibate priest, ordained to be "empty for God" as Jesus was, as St. Paul was, reminds married men and women to seek and find this holy emptiness in themselves and to turn intentionally to God to fill it—that is, to practice celibacy themselves in all relationships except that with their spouse.

But the marital promise to be "overflowing for God" complements the promise of celibacy as well and lends it invaluable support. For if he is not to live a life turned selfishly inward, a celibate priest needs to emulate life lived selflessly outward by family-forming husbands and wives.

"They have no wine," the Virgin Mother told her celibate Son at the wedding feast in Cana. "Fill the jars to the brim," He replied; and joy overflowed the guests' glasses.