

Single by Default

[Faith in Focus](#)

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When a vocation is not a vocation



(iStock photo)

As children, my older sister and I staged elaborate Barbie doll games. Whenever we played, my sister's dolls would go off to work, go on dates and generally engage in the adult world as we encountered it. Her dolls would eventually marry one of our two Ken dolls in an extravagant Barbie wedding. My dolls, on the other hand, were always married the moment we began and procreated at an unrealistic pace soon thereafter. Often we would have to draft other dolls into our games to function as children. Strawberry Shortcake often made an appearance, as did an occasional troll. I was also the child who, at the tender age of 5 or 6, boldly declared to my father that I would have a million children. He playfully pointed out that I would probably have to number them rather than name them, and then he would call out, "Number 1,532!"

Not long ago I participated in a panel called "Living Mercy in Daily Life." As I sat uncomfortably on a stool next to a parish priest, a Franciscan sister and a married couple, it occurred to me that I was the only person in the row who was not living the vocation I felt called to. I was the only

one whose state of life lacked free assent and enduring permanency—the essential marks of a vocation. I was glad to be included on the panel but also a bit perplexed.

I was glad to be included because, according to [a 2012 Pew study](#), one in five adults ages 25 years and older—42 million Americans—had never been married. The authors of the study concluded that if current trends continue, one quarter of today's young adults will remain unwed into their 40s and 50s. The causes for the rise in singleness are complex, but suffice it to say it is a growing reality that needs to be honestly represented in all its pain and possibility. Being single touches my daily life in ways more mundane, more painful and more beautiful than stereotypes of single people, particularly single women, might suggest.

On the other hand, I was uncomfortable with the underlying assumption that being single, particularly being single by default, is a vocation in the same way as marriage, the priesthood or consecrated life. After all, I was the only one on the panel actively trying to exit my present state of life.

In a culture that oscillates between the unqualified celebration of single life and despairing laments of it, it is tempting to try a cost-benefit analysis, or a pros/cons list.

Cons: I go to bed alone every night and wake up alone every morning. There is no one to share household tasks with, or to do the grocery shopping. I wait for the plumber and do all the yard work. If the toilet is going to get cleaned, I am the one who will clean it. There is no one to pick a fight with when I am feeling tired or cranky. I do not receive the tender embrace and the soft sigh of my exhausted child as she leans her head on my shoulder right before she falls asleep. Sometimes I realize that I have gone several days without the physical touch of another person.

Pros: I do not have to listen to anyone snore; I get the whole bed to myself, and I can sleep until 10 a.m. on Saturday morning. There is no one who does things I find annoying, unacceptable or disgusting. The toilet is always clean. No one is going to pick a fight with me when they are tired or cranky. I never have to shepherd a child through a buffet line (which is a lot harder than it sounds). Theoretically, at least, there is no one who makes demands on my time or my attention when I'd rather be doing something else.

There are many problems with this kind of analysis, not the least of which is the assumption that being single—that any vocation—is fundamentally about me, about my preferences, about weighing benefits and losses. As seductive as this kind of thinking about vocation is, it is profoundly un-Christian. At its core, a Christian understanding of vocation tells us that it purges us of our selfish desires. Christian vocation exists in the gift: the gift of existence; the gift of baptism; the gift of marriage, ordained or consecrated life; the gift of particular charisms for work in the apostolate. Christian vocation is fundamentally not personal achievement or a project of self-fulfillment. A vocation, in other words, is a gift and call from God to die to oneself and become a gift to another. This means my own vocation is not about me at all. I still desire to marry.

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As a child who imagined I would have a million children, I never thought I would feel the bitter sadness I sometimes do when friends discuss the anxieties and frustrations, the absurdities and joys, of being a parent. I never imagined that some people would try to figure out how my singleness was my own fault, rather than a sign of the vicissitudes of life to which we are all vulnerable. I never imagined my snarkiness would get the better of me when I encountered religious who express the same pain at facing an empty bed night after night, and instead of feeling compassion, found myself thinking, "Yeah, try doing that and having to pay rent." Yet, here I am in my mid-30s trying, like a growing number of people, to live somewhere between stability and uncertainty.

Things do not always work out the way we expect. Life is precarious. We are thrown into situations over which we have no control. Married couples experience infertility. The person one falls in love with may not return that love. A religious order may ask a member to leave. We are

all vulnerable. Yet we are called to holiness precisely in the circumstances of reality as it is, not as we would like it to be.

But I did not discern a call to single life. In fact, I am deeply skeptical that unconsecrated single life is a vocation at all, any more than infertility is a vocation, or chronic illness is a vocation. I suspect our inclination to call the unvowed single life a vocation comes from anxiety about putting people into categories, about making the suffering and the scandal of our unfulfilled desires a bit safer, about comforting ourselves with the idea that God will always act according to our will. Which means that perhaps my single life, like so many others, is not a vocation. Yet I am also called to holiness today, now, here. Not at some vague time in the future when I may get married. I feel this tension every day.

Living in Between

Being single is not easy, and there are days when it feels like God has forgotten me. But being Christian doesn't come with any guarantees or promises that we will be spared suffering. Christ's experience of abandonment in the garden of Gethsemane, his pleading prayer to the Father, becomes our pleading. I take up the words of Jesus: "Father if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42).

Being unwillingly single requires particular agility. It means balancing commitment to particular people and practices while also remaining open to the possibility of marriage. It has required me to navigate loneliness, desire, commitment and stability in ways I never anticipated. The reality of being single is with me most days, as is the desire to share my life and body with another in marriage—to make a concrete and permanent commitment to another person before God in the church. Realistically, I understand that I may never marry, that despite my desire for the beautiful mess of marriage and family life, I may remain single. Yet I am called to holiness today. I was called to holiness on the day of my baptism, as a Christian incorporated into the reality of divine love. I am called to remain wildly and uncomfortably open to possibilities, to saying, "Still, not my will but yours" to God, to my neighbor, to the church and in ways I never imagined.

Sometimes I say these words with tears streaming down my face, at other times with self-pitying anger knotted in my stomach. Sometimes I say them with resignation, at other times with no particular emotion at all. But at other times when I say these words, joy pierces the sadness, assumes it in a way, and I pray these words as though I really believe them. God's will be done, because divine love penetrates even the wounds of life's tragedies and disappointments, transforming them from bitterness to joy, from self-pity to self-sacrifice.

In the Eucharist, we encounter the kind of extravagant squandering of love to which we are all called. In his unreserved yes to the Father, Christ destroys death and transforms it into life. He takes up all of the ambiguity and tragedy that attends life and transfigures it into possibility and joy. In the brackets of Eucharistic love, being single is not just an empty holding pattern or a negative space waiting to be filled. It becomes the freedom to give myself away in love in ways I hadn't imagined: to hold a squirming godchild during Mass so his parents can attend to his younger siblings, to change a diaper, to doze on my best friend's sofa while the children sleep upstairs so she and her husband can have a much needed evening off, to spend my Sunday mornings catechizing children, to enter the wild spaces of life in community. To be available to say yes.

No matter what shape or form my life takes—even if I don't marry until I am 75, even if I never marry—as a Christian I am called to the wasteful, uncalculating expenditure of love, a love that only flows from the open heart of Christ, a love that makes the in-between fruitful, that makes time abundant. It is the love that transforms the ambiguity of being single into the freedom of saying yes, "your will be done." Perhaps this is not a vocation to a state of life, but simply and profoundly to being a Christian in a broken world.

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