

CELEBRATION OF
*Covenantal
Celibacy*
A LITURGY

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EXPLANATION OF TERMINOLOGY/LANGUAGE

By emphasizing the covenantal nature of celibacy in the service's name, the intention is to underscore that singleness is a meaningful calling, regardless of its duration, to long-suffering love and committed service in the single person's relationship to God and to the church. And in underscoring celebration, the service reflects a tenor of joy that a calling to faithful obedience has been embraced.

Throughout the liturgy, the term "celibate singleness" is most frequently used to capture the vocation/commitment the celebrant is embracing rather than referencing it as just "singleness" or "celibacy." The uniting of these words underscores that these two terms are not mutually exclusive—a person can be single without being celibate and a person can be celibate without being single. Additionally, the term attempts to honor the rich history of celibacy throughout the church's story while also integrating the more modern convention of singleness, thereby embodying ancient-future worship in the language.

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OPENING PROCLAMATION—OFFICIANT

Unlike the preparation for weddings, with which most congregants are familiar, a Celebration of Covenantal Celibacy service will require catechesis of the congregation in teaching them both the significance of the ceremony in terms of what is represented and the expectations surrounding their active participation. The Opening Proclamation is intended to cover both of these important matters.

OFFICIANT: Brothers and sisters, we are gathered together to participate in a unique service of worship to celebrate the vocation of celibate singleness. Throughout Scripture, we glean a deep sense of how God has interwoven the vocations of marriage and singleness to work in concert to bear witness to God's character and His redeeming love. Each vocation carries a different role as each was made in God's good and perfect design to reflect His divinity and to mediate His love in distinct ways; yet the vocations are unified in being equally God-honoring and worthy of celebration. As the body of Christ, we cannot fully reflect and better understand the fullness of God's nature without both marrieds and singles, nor can we live into our full potential as disciples of Christ without each other.

We have gathered in the sight of God to witness and to celebrate a commitment to covenantal celibacy. Jesus blessed the vocation of celibate singleness through His own person and through His proclamation that there will be no marriage or giving in marriage at the resurrection. Celibacy is a gift that points us to our eternal state when we are in perfect communion with God. _____ has chosen to faithfully answer God's call to celibate singleness, and we have the sacred privilege of sharing in solemnizing his/her commitment and in supporting him/her.

In recognition of the inherent dignity and sanctity of celibacy, we want to approach this service with reverence as we acknowledge the sacred responsibility of this honorable calling. At the same time, we seek to foster a tone of joy as we celebrate _____'s faithful response to God's call.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION—OFFICIANT

Pre-written or extemporaneous prayer may be offered.

OPENING SONG(S) OF PRAISE/PETITION—CONGREGATION

Suggestions are provided in the appendix.

TESTIMONY—COVENANT CELEBRANT

The Testimony segment affords an opportunity for the covenant celebrant to share his/her story of discerning and accepting his/her call to celibate singleness. A personal account from the celebrant not only makes the service unique to the individual, it also invites the congregation to better understand that celibate singleness is a vocation that is entered into with a great deal of intentionality and purpose. Hearing the celebrant's journey of answering God's call to faithful celibacy will also help the congregants know how to support the celebrant in his/her continued journey of faithfulness.

COMMUNAL LITURGY OF LAMENT—CONGREGATION

The overarching narrative of Scripture conveys that we, as disciples, are all called to different expressions of costly obedience—and often that calling entails pain and sorrow. As believers, we affirm that Scripture conveys and invites a variety of emotions and we profess that honest worship expresses lament as well as assurance. Therefore, this optional segment allows the covenant celebrant and his/her community to speak honestly of the lament that the call to sacrificial obedience brings. If a liturgy of lament is not fitting for the covenant celebrant's service, this segment can be excluded.

Covenant celebrant may elect to extend his/her testimony by sharing the significance of the liturgy/Scripture passages in connection with his/her journey. Covenant celebrant and his/her community may elect to craft a personal liturgy to honor his/her unique story.

OFFICIANT: Even though this is a joy-filled service meant to celebrate a commitment to faithful obedience, we want to create space and give voice to the pain that our call to sacrificial discipleship often entails. Please stand as we recite the liturgy together.
(An example is provided in the appendix.)

SCRIPTURE READING—OFFICIANT OR CONGREGANT

A passage or series of passages on the theme of singleness or covenantal sacrifice can be read in preparation for the Homily or Witness to Celibate Singleness. (Suggestions are provided in the appendix.)

HOMILY OR WITNESS TO CELIBATE SINGLENES—OFFICIANT

The ultimate purpose of the homily should be a proclamation of God's Word and truth; as such, the homily should primarily focus on what the vocation of celibate singleness teaches us about God and His character. Yet, it's also meaningful to make the homily personal by incorporating the covenant celebrant's story and how he/she uniquely mediates God's love to his/her community. The homily allows the officiant the twofold opportunity to: (1) catechize

the congregation regarding the significance of celibate singleness and (2) speak words of exhortation to the covenant celebrant in preparation for the vow.

PROCLAMATION OF COVENANT—COVENANT CELEBRANT

Officiant can guide the covenant celebrant through a responsive proclamation of the historical vow of monastic celibacy voiced by faithful saints in the Catholic tradition while incorporating personal elements to honor his/her unique story (example provided below). Alternatively, the covenant celebrant can compose his/her own original vow.

OFFICIANT: At this time, _____ will take his/her vow of covenantal celibacy. To join the echo of many faithful saints who have gone before, the vow _____ will take is derived from the liturgy of the monastic vow of celibacy. He/she has tailored the vow to honor his/her unique story and calling.

The vow he/she is taking has two distinct movements to reflect the recipients of his/her vow. First and foremost, _____'s commitment to celibacy is an act of faithful obedience to God. He/she is steadfastly committed to upholding the biblical ethic regarding marriage and sex and is, therefore, choosing celibacy as an expression of personal holiness. Through this commitment, he/she is reflecting the positive good of celibacy and being more in union with Christ through his/her calling.

Secondly, as a member of Christ's body, _____'s concern is also toward communal holiness. As believers, our choices and actions are never committed or felt in isolation; as a fully integrated member of this spiritual family, his/her decisions affect those whom he/she loves, and he/she has chosen this act of costly obedience as an expression of love to us and to the church.

Optional: This vow shall only be amended if God's call on his/her life changes within the holy boundaries defined by Scripture.

Or for those who sense a calling to a more permanent commitment:

The duration of this vow is intended to be lifelong, only to be amended if God's calling on his/her life changes within the holy boundaries defined by Scripture.

OFFICIANT: _____, as we stand before the Lord and before your brothers and sisters, I ask you now: Do you establish or continue in your commitment to uphold the biblical ethic regarding marriage and sex through chastity in singleness, and here present yourself?

_____: With God's help, I do.

OFFICIANT: Will you promise to faithfully love God and His church, daily choosing to follow God's will by dying to self?

_____: With God's help and with the support of my family, I will.

OFFICIANT: Because _____ is not taking this vow alone, his/her family, given and chosen, will stand with him/her as he/she proclaims his/her covenant. (*Family comes forward.*)

For the Christian, covenant is initiated by God and affirmed by the believer. As a sign of his/her yes to his/her heavenly Father's covenantal love, _____ faces God's altar in this act of personal surrender.

_____, if you'll repeat after me:
In the name of God,
as an act of faithful obedience,
I commit myself to celibate singleness.
In seeking union with Christ in chastity,
I present my body as a living sacrifice
and offer myself to God completely in service to Him.
I commit to fostering the gifts God has given me,
to reflect the all-inclusive nature of Jesus's love,
to invest in spiritual children,
to share in the suffering of Christ,
and to serve as a living symbol of our eternal state
when we will reenter perfect communion with God.

To the church and spiritual family, _____ now faces you as he/she makes his/her commitment not only to God but also to you.

_____, if you'll repeat after me:
To the church and spiritual family God has entrusted to me:
I also offer myself as a living sacrifice.
I commit to pursuing celibacy of both body and mind
as a gift of communal holiness
and as an act of costly love to you.

For the time that I am called to singleness,
I vow to uphold this commitment from this day forward
as I anticipate the full redemption
of my desires in the new creation.
This is my solemn vow.

RESPONSE OF THE SPIRITUAL FAMILY—CONGREGATION

As Scripture makes clear, we, as members of the body of Christ, are exhorted to uphold one another. As married couples are not meant to bear the weight of marriage on their own strength, singles who are accepting the sacred responsibility of faithful celibacy need the support and love of their family. The Response of the Spiritual Family expresses a mutuality of love and support—in choosing celibacy, the covenant celebrant is choosing a life of costly obedience as a gift of love and sacrifice to the church. In response to this gift, the church in turn commits to supporting and upholding the celebrant so that he/she can faithfully live into his/her calling.

OFFICIANT: *(Optional paragraph for those sensing a call to lifelong celibacy.)* The calling of celibate singleness as a response of obedience to the Lord is one that produces much joy, but it also demands trust, commitment, and sacrifice. One of those sacrifices that _____ has made is having biological children. But the life of the faithful single testifies that our lineage is not ultimately assured by the passage of the family name to biological children. Rather, our lineage is grounded in the resurrection and in the nurturing of spiritual children. _____'s commitment to singleness is a measure of

faith as he/she trusts that his/her lineage will live on because there is a resurrection and that he/she will be remembered by the family called the church.

The good news of the gospel proclaims that, as a redeemed child of God, _____ is not without a family and lineage because he/she is a member of the spiritual family called the church; therefore, _____ is not entering into this vow without support. Those of us gathered here have the sacred privilege of serving as _____'s family. As he/she makes this commitment to faithful singleness as an act of love to us, we, in turn, make the commitment to love and uphold him/her.

OFFICIANT:

Spiritual family, I ask you now:

Will all of you, by God's grace, do everything in your power to uphold and care for _____ in his/her commitment to celibate singleness?

CONGREGATION: We will.

OFFICIANT:

Will you promise to:

celebrate him/her when he/she chooses another day of faithfulness to God,
encourage him/her when he/she feels despair,
pray for him/her when he/she feels weak,
hold him/her accountable when he/she faces temptation,
and love him/her throughout his/her journey?

CONGREGATION: We will.

**BLESSING AND GIVING OF EBENEZER—OFFICIANT
AND CELEBRANT**

The covenant celebrant can elect to present a visible representation of the covenant (Ebenezer) for blessing and receiving. Inspired by the story in First Samuel 7, when Samuel presents and establishes the stone to remind the Israelites of God's presence in battle, the Ebenezer is meant to remind the covenant celebrant of the solemn commitment he/she has made and of God's help in his/her time of need.

Rather than the officiant giving it to the covenant celebrant, the Ebenezer should be presented to the officiant for blessing, but ultimately the Ebenezer is offered by the covenant celebrant as a symbol of his/her faithfulness and the offering of his/her body as a living sacrifice unto God. Suggestions of Ebenezers include: a ring, shawl, plaque reflecting the covenant, a cross, etc.

OFFICIANT: As an outward and visible sign of the vow _____ has taken today, he/she has presented an Ebenezer. Just as Samuel established the stone to remind the Israelites of God's covenantal love in battle and of their calling to remain steadfast in their faith, _____ is establishing a sign to remind him/her of the covenant he/she has entered.

_____ has chosen his/her Ebenezer to be a _____.

Officiant or celebrant offers an explanation of the Ebenezer and its symbolism.

_____ has presented the Ebenezer for blessing and consecration;
_____’s family and I will lay hands on the _____ and pray over it.

OFFICIANT: Bless, O Lord, this Ebenezer as an outward sign of an inward grace, that he/she who wears it may live in Your peace and continue in Your favor all the days of his/her life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In the name of Jesus, you are chosen and claimed for His calling, beloved son/daughter of God.
Amen.

As God has given you the calling of celibate singleness, receive now this Ebenezer as a reminder that God’s covenantal faithfulness will sustain you in your covenant.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND OIL ANOINTING

As a personal sacrament representing the covenant celebrant’s setting apart and commissioning to fulfill his/her vocation of covenantal celibacy, the officiant and/or the spiritual family can engage in a time of anointing the covenant celebrant with oil to consecrate the vow that has been taken.

OFFICIANT: As _____ has publicly affirmed his/her vow to covenantal celibacy, we want to commend him/her to God’s care and commission him/her to live faithfully into his/her vocation through intercessory prayer and by anointing him/her with oil.

I invite you to surround _____ as you feel comfortable. _____ will offer the opening prayer, we’ll allow a few minutes for anyone to pray aloud as you feel led, and then I will offer the closing prayer.

God, through Your coeternal Son, You created all that is, and through the mystery of His holy incarnation graciously renewed the world grown old in sin. We humbly ask that the grace of that same Lord of ours may mercifully look upon _____, Your servant, who has promised to renounce the ways of the world and to walk faithfully in Your good and perfect will. Renewed in the depth of his/her spirit by Your Holy Spirit, may he/she remove the old self and its deeds and put on the new self, created in Your image. May his/hers be the firm support of true humility and obedience in the love of his/her spiritual family, so that he/she may fulfill in blessed perseverance that which You Yourself have inspired him/her to promise. Amen.

Trusting God’s call upon your life and His empowerment of you to faithfully fulfill your vocation, _____, I anoint you with oil in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, that you would receive God’s strength and grace to faithfully reflect Him and His love to the world. Amen.

SONG OF COMMISSIONING—CONGREGATION

As a worshipful response, the congregation joins in song to reflect on the calls and commissioning we all have as the body of Christ. (Suggestions are provided in the appendix.)

OFFICIANT: As our Song of Commissioning, we will sing _____. Although the covenant today was taken by an individual, he/she is upholding this covenant for and with a whole community; we enter into this covenant with him/her. As such, we will sing with collective pronouns to remind us that we take up our crosses and daily follow Jesus as a body of believers.

COMMUNION—CONGREGATION

Emphasizing that this service is meant to be participative and all-inclusive, the congregation can take part in the communal sacrament of the Eucharist both to celebrate the celebrant's covenant and to remember their own vow to "take in remembrance of me."

The service liturgy can continue with the Communion liturgy of the covenant celebrant's denomination or an alternative tailored liturgy may be used. If Communion is not celebrated, the officiant can transition to the next section.

OFFICIANT: In taking this vow, _____ is saying to Christ and His church, "this is my body given for you" as a living sacrifice. He/she is not the first to make that promise; the promise lies before us on this table that Christ goes before us in all that He calls us to. Jesus modeled this sacrificial love for us, and we commemorate His passion and resurrection through the taking of Communion. To celebrate this covenantal vow we've witnessed, to remember that we are all called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, and to avail ourselves to the grace we need to fulfill the callings on our lives, we invite you to participate in Communion.

If the community is going to celebrate Communion, include the Communion liturgy and music at this time.

CLOSING SONG OF AFFIRMATION—CONGREGATION

The congregation can join in a song that focuses on the all-sustaining and superseding love of Jesus as a reminder that the body of Christ, whether married or single, is dependent on a single source of love—the love of Jesus. (Suggestions are provided in the appendix.)

OFFICIANT: As a worshipful response and affirmation of all that has taken place today, we will close with a song that is focused on the superseding love of Jesus. For _____, who has committed himself/herself to singleness, his/her ultimate and excellent source of love is satisfied by Jesus. This is also a reminder to all of us that our identity and source of sustenance is ultimately grounded in Jesus and His sacrificial, covenantal love.

We will be singing _____. Stand and let's join our voices.

BENEDICTION—OFFICIANT

OFFICIANT: Receive now the benediction:
Now may the redeeming grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the covenantal love of God our Father, and the strengthening presence of the Holy Spirit fill you with joy and peace as you walk in the promises of God. Amen.

APPENDIX

I. Suggestions for Opening Song(s) of Praise/Petition

“Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

“God of Grace and God of Glory”

“How Firm a Foundation”

II. Example for Communal Liturgy of Lament

Leader: O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before You.

All: Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to hear my cry!

I strive to uphold Your statutes and to follow Your path . . .

because I trust that Your will leads to life eternal.

I hear the call to deny myself and to take up my cross and follow You . . .

knowing that in sharing in His suffering, I will become more like Christ.

Yet I face the temptations of my fleshly desires and the sirenic lures of a culture that seeks to lead me astray.

In my weakness, I long for an easier path with less sacrifice.

My soul is in deep anguish. I am weary with my groanings.

You have caused my friends to shun me; my companions have become darkness.

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

I am a reproach of people; scorned and despised by others.

All who see me mock at me, “Commit your cause to the Lord; let Him deliver—let Him rescue the one in whom He delights!”

Then we said, “We will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.”

We will remember the deeds of the Lord; what god is great like our God?

He puts the lonely in families;

He gives a home to the solitary.

He is faithful and will not allow us to be tested beyond our abilities.

He preserves the souls of His saints; He delivers them out of the hand of the wicked.

Your way was through the sea, Your path through the great waters . . .

yet Your footsteps were unseen.

We consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us.

We gladly embrace the cross, knowing that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him.

III. Suggestions for Scripture Reading

Matthew 19:29

Mark 12:24–25

Romans 12:1

1 Corinthians 7:25–35

IV. Suggestions for Song of Commissioning

“A Charge to Keep I Have”

“I Surrender All”

“Jesus I My Cross Have Taken”

“Lord, You Give the Great Commission”

“Take My Life”

V. Suggestions for Closing Song of Affirmation

“Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life”

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

“O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus”

“Your Love, Oh God, Has Called Us Here” (exclude verse 3)