

The Celibate Uncle (Aunt): Another blessed vocation
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Brother Joe and I worked together for 13 years at the Catholic high school that our religious order owns and administers. Beyond our shared ministry and living in community together we didn't have much in common. As facilities manager, he was concerned with HVAC issues and RFPs to read. As a teacher and administrator, I was concerned with SAT scores and collegial observations to write. He loved Broadway music while I blasted rock 'n roll. He would go out for a bike ride while I laced up my sneakers for a run. That special thing about which we did agree was that there was no greater vocation than that of a celibate uncle. With excitement we exchanged stories about family get-togethers, the wonderful accomplishments of our nephews and nieces, their latest activities and exploits. We could visit their homes, have tremendous fun with them, hold the babies once changed, spoil them, sugar them up and then leave. We would brag about their strengths and minimize their growing edges. All of our friends heard many family stories. And, we knew that our nephews and nieces were a special grace to living well our religious life. Let me share just one anecdote.

"To listen to your messages press one; to get messages, press two. 'Hey Uncle John, this is Danny. Just calling to ask if you can pray for DJ, one of our basketball players at Central Catholic. He got in a car accident driving home from the school dance. He must have fallen asleep and drove off into a ditch. The police didn't find him till the next morning. He's in a coma. Please pray for him. Okay? Love you.'" As Danny was only in fifth grade when he left this

message, it tells me three things. First, Danny already has his sights set on playing basketball at the high school level. He even speaks as if he is already part of the team telling me, "We lost a close one last night." Second, not only does Danny believe in the power of prayer but he is other-centered, especially if one be a star athlete. Third, Danny looks to the celibate uncle as one to whom he can go for prayers of intercession. Danny is now in sixth grade; DJ is recovering nicely, and I am still blessed to be given the privilege to pray for the intentions of siblings and their greatest gift to me: my nephews and nieces.

Prayer is an incredibly special gift we, religious, offer to our nephews and nieces. Because of our vocation and its implicit commitment to individual and communal prayer, we become the obvious "go-to" people to pray for another's petitions. We are asked to pray for this nephew's intention, this niece's special favor, or that of someone whom we don't even know but is dear to our loved ones. They believe not only in the power of prayer, but in our ability to be a special conduit to God. In truth, our fidelity to prayer in our state in life frees us to be just that.

Several years ago, I was challenged by a classmate to include my family, naming each one individually, in the intercessory part of my prayer life. Daily at morning and evening prayer, I conclude the intercessory portion of prayer by naming each sibling and their children from oldest to youngest. I include the intentions they made known to me, ones asked for by their parents, and the unvoiced ones I may sense are needed. In a generic way, I pray through the intercession of our parents (their grandparents) that all within the family may be

safe, protected from harm, happy, healthy, faithful to our parents' (grandparents') example, and open to the presence and blessing of the Lord. Depending on the situation, I add specific intentions from guidance for one's college choice to another's success in his Master's program. Including them daily in prayer brings to mind the gift they are as individuals and the special relationship I share with each of them.

In addition to prayer, there are other aspects of the spiritual role we offer our relatives. We are always invited to each reception of a new sacrament, the yearly school Christmas play, and every graduation. They expect something "spiritual" from us whether it is a holy card or a blessing on their foreheads. Our small monetary gifts are always appreciated in a unique way as they know we do not have the wherewithal that their other aunts and uncles may have. It is often likely that the celibate aunt or uncle is the one who remembers all the birthdays of the nephews and nieces. They count on us for the yearly birthday card, perhaps one at Halloween, and a small gift at Christmas. They call on us for that special "religion project" or an answer to some theological question. Of course, this can be a mixed blessing. When we do not know offhand who was the mother of Ruth or the Pope of frequent communion, they call into question how we got ordained or what kind of a religious we are. We are asked to bring them into the Church, to give them their first Eucharist, to witness their exchange of vows or to read at their wedding. We hear of them explaining our way of life to their friends with a sense of special pride, bragging in their own way. Many of

them give us weekly calls to “check in” and affording us the opportunity to affirm and to express our ongoing love for them.

We are their personal cheerleaders in each and every adventure, whether it is a passing fad or a passion that perdures. They expect us to say that they played well regardless. They understand that we have a right to be biased that they were the best on stage, on the court or the playing field. Every picture they paint is a Rembrandt and every musical composition borders on something worthy of Carnegie Hall.

Our nephews and nieces give us joy and hope. We are uniquely privileged to share their lives and stories in a way that maybe their other aunts and uncles cannot, as they are necessarily attentive to their own children’s journey. As we have no children of our own, we have the freedom to be the special aunt or uncle. They all become as our own, in a special way collectively and individually.

Sensing a special bond of trust, we may be privy to hearing something that their own parents do not yet know (one getting stopped by the police for driving over the speed limit or one niece protecting another nephew from getting into trouble) although this is often not serious and always well after the fact. There may be those times when we serve as a compassionate ear when they are not ready to go to their parents. They come to us that we may offer hope, understanding and acceptance. They know clearly that we would never withhold something their parents needed to know. Yet, we can listen to them tell us that their parents don’t understand or are being unreasonable. They hope that we

may serve as the voice of reason interceding on their behalf as to why they should have a cell phone, be allowed to drive to school or be permitted to stay out just a little longer. We may be able to reach them simply because we are not their parents. We can be their sounding board and we can let them clearly know how deeply their parents love and care for them, sensitizing them to the delicate vocation of parenting.

All of this allows us to share this great sense of family in our homilies or our classes with much pride and vitality. In understanding them, their accomplishments, and their growing edges, we are able to relate to parents to whom we preach or whose children we teach. Our love for them manifests itself in our ability to be compassionate and gentle with those whom we serve who may be similarly situated as our nephews and nieces. It grounds us, allowing us to see that there is no vocation more difficult, more precious, and more needed in the Church than parenting. Invited into the homes and lives of our siblings, we get an eclectic sense of what it means to parent and to grow up in this changing world as a child, teenager, or young adult. In sharing these stories, our preaching and teaching becomes real, vital, challenging, and spirit-filled. We can offer a sense of faith because we have received this from our relatives by being open to all that it means to be an aunt or uncle. Our siblings' fidelity to their spouses and children exhort us to a renewed commitment to be poor, chaste, and obedient for ourselves and the world. The relationship afforded us as aunt and uncle reminds us that we were born into a natural family before entering our religious family. It allows us to journey like everyone else as we see our loved

ones struggling in school, working tirelessly to afford tuition, trying to stay sober, searching for employment, or hoping to find that special soul mate. We enter their growing pains as prayerful supporters often seeing the cycle repeated as the ages vary from youngest to oldest. Such sharing of experiences helps form our daily mantras that we reiterate in the apostolate such as “family is family.” More importantly, being privileged to be a part of a family, we can serve as the one who stands off in the distance finding that special quality for each one and helping them to appreciate the unique spark of the divine that lies within each of them. We share different relationships unique to the individual that change and grow over the years. We may have different traditions, habits, and customs with one family as opposed to another. But we highlight for each of them the greater sense of family, this special gift, and the God who is the giver of all.

Yet, we share with family our religious lives and what we have to offer from our own ministry. We can offer a sense of hope to the siblings who are too closely connected to their child in such a way that they cannot see beyond the ADD, poor self-image, lack of responsibility, inability to make this team or star in that role. We can share that their children’s growing edges are no different than others their age and offer the assurance that “things take time” and “this, too, shall pass.” Often, we are able to downplay the sense of severity the parents may see and share with them the more severe plight of others to whom we may be ministering. With the passing of years, we highlight for our nephews, nieces, and their parents their fine growth and beautiful maturity. At the same time, we may have difficulty with them growing up so quickly. It may cause us to reflect on

our own maturing, our individual mortality, the fragility of our life, and perhaps raise some generativity issues with wondering what lessons we will have handed down to them.

Additionally, we share our religious family, its members and its charism with our relatives. We enjoy that our nephews and nieces refer to our fellow religious by their first name (Bob, Jack, Mary, Pat) showing the close bond or intimacy they share as opposed to a title that many in the apostolate use (Father, Sister, Brother). They become extended members of our various religious orders championing our cause and ministry. Later in life, they invite us into their newly formed families and homes. They come to visit, take us to dinner, invite us on their vacations, and support us as benefactors.

These sentiments expressed may not be the lived situation at all times. Similarly, they may not be real or felt by some religious. Perhaps we find ourselves at odds with members of our family. As religious, we are no different than any other person. Though wonderfully redeemed, we are keenly aware of our flaws and sinfulness. If not, our fellow religious remind us. This is a blessing of living the communal life. Indeed, we may find ourselves estranged from one, some, or all of our family. But the question begs to be asked, is there something so devastating that prayer, grace, and the presence of God cannot heal? We cannot make up this lost time. Our nephews and nieces only have one "first communion," special recital, or game winning three-pointer. Let us be gentle, loving, and forgiving ministers with our "real" family so that their grace and spirit

may enrich our ministry in the apostolate. Perhaps, we need to ask forgiveness from them.

Finally, our nephews' and nieces' trust in us, their valuing of our vocation as religious and the graced role we serve as their special aunts and uncles dedicated to the wider family of God inspires us to a tremendous sense of fidelity. It exhorts us to always be women and men of integrity, faithful to the calling and ministry entrusted to us. When it becomes extremely difficult to be faithful, when it is more desirable to be anything but poor, chaste, and obedient, who we are *to* and *for* them serves as the motive to be the religious we vowed before God, them and the Church. We cannot disappoint them. Being a celibate aunt or uncle is more than another hat, another role, another relationship. It is a phenomenal blessing like few others that breathes meaning, import, and significance to who we are and how we are that for all of God's people.

Brother Joe and I no longer live in the same local community. However, when we gather for a communal celebration we are certain to keep the other abreast not about ourselves but more so about our other special selves: our blessing as uncles and all the joy that our nephews and nieces bring to us.