

Celibacy

The word celibacy means “the state of being unmarried” and, for a priest, it also means a little more than that in terms of his promise of chastity. Recently there was a panel discussion on the television about celibacy and the decline in priestly vocations – obviously trying to make a connection between the two things – and it started me wondering just how well people understand the subject especially as the media don’t always do a very good job because they certainly don’t understand it.

Two things need to be said by way of introduction. Pope John Paul II has said that “celibacy isn’t essential to the priesthood” and his point is amply illustrated by the number of ex-Anglican married priests now ministering in the Church – but at the same time the Church continues to require celibacy of all its other priests. The second point comes from a reference book that says, on the subject of celibacy: “Because of the great shortage of priests worldwide... there is a growing movement within the Church advocating a return to the practice of voluntary celibacy.”¹ This refers to the fact that in the early Church celibacy was voluntary and was only established as a requirement of priests in AD306, a requirement renewed in the Middle Ages after it had become widely ignored.

While it might indeed be the case that more men might become priests if they were also allowed to marry², there is more to the requirement of celibacy than just the aspect of chastity. Historically both things have become a single entity as it were, but as long as society may perhaps not understand why someone in this day and age would voluntarily choose to remain both single and celibate (celibate in the sense of not entering into a physical relationship), then the risk is that not understanding may lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

The point was made during our seminary training that priesthood and celibacy are in fact two separate though complementary vocations and as such should be equally embraced. A priest should never “put up with” celibacy in order to pursue his experience of vocation to priesthood. It shouldn’t be an imposition in that sense, something tolerated as a means to an end. By the same token the celibate priesthood cannot be a refuge for those who have difficulties establishing relationships. The seminary system has somehow got to test a person’s emotional and psychological maturity prior to ordination as thoroughly as it tests their priestly vocation.

¹ “A-Z of the Catholic Church (Connaughton & Silcock)

² (and it isn’t my purpose here to get into the issue of the ordination of women)

It was also suggested that if a candidate for priesthood found himself saying he would marry if the Church changed its mind on the requirement of celibacy, maybe there would be grounds to question his understanding of it and its place within priesthood. It would be a different thing entirely to saying he could see himself marrying if celibacy had been optional. At the same time it would be wrong for a priest to expect that accepting and embracing celibacy for all the right reasons will thereafter protect him from the possibility of a challenge to his celibacy – nor should he build walls around himself to stop that from happening.

But then, why celibacy? Each priest will have his own answer.

For me, the situation of being unmarried makes *availability* - to ministry - possible. Clearly if a priest were married, his commitment to wife and family would have to be a priority and rightly so. As a priest I am on-call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (or six if we manage to take a day off!). Such a level of availability would be an unjust and impossible expectation for a married man and so, we might ask, how do ex-Anglican married priests manage? Is their situation any different to how it was in the Anglican Church? Might Catholics have different expectations because they are used to their priests being available at any hour of any day or night? How do our married deacons manage? This is new ground for the Church.

It does, of course, call into question whether even celibate clergy should be expected to be quite so available; a priest isn't an automaton after all. This can be particularly evident in the case of hospital chaplaincy. Traditionally there may have been several priests in the local parish to share the on-call hours but now that this is usually no longer the case, it seems both unjust and wrong to expect a priest to be on-call all night and still be available to carry out his parish duties all day, and to do this five or even six days of the week. And if we accept that it is an excessive expectation for a celibate priest, imagine what it would be like for a priest with a wife and family. Should the Church be putting marriage in a position of such possible stress?

This leads to other concerns and takes us back to a point I made a couple of paragraphs ago. The priest doesn't (shouldn't) exist in a social or emotional vacuum, he needs other people - and not just other priests. He needs friendships; he needs help and support; he needs to relax and wind down. In short his needs are the same as anyone else's and so he can't just become – or be allowed to become - a crusty old bachelor living in his clerical tower insulated from the challenges and possible temptations

around him, cut off from the very people – both male and female - whose help and support he needs and whom he serves. There is also the danger of the insulated priest becoming a law unto himself if, whether in reality or in his own perception, he is only accountable to and responsible for himself – a point I’ll return to later.

Celibacy isn’t a shield to hide behind; it’s a context, a circumstance within which a priest carries out his ministry. First and foremost he is a priest not a celibate, hence the pope’s comment that celibacy isn’t essential to priesthood and the fact that ex-Anglican married priests are doing just fine. But the Church continues to require its priests to be celibate and we’ve been looking at one, pastoral, reason for this. At the same time another explanation for its continuation could be a purely practical one.

Any change to making celibacy optional would have to take into account the fact that in many countries the people would simply be unable to support married priests and their families. Most priests at the moment receive a remuneration that is well below minimum wage and even then many parishes are struggling to support both their priest and the running costs of the parish. The prospect of having to pay a priest an actual and realistic salary that would support him and his family would be out of the question. This is why, at the moment, those married clergy that we do have are often asked, in addition to their parish commitments, to take on paid chaplaincies in order to supplement their actual income.

The Church in this country ruled against “worker priests” some years ago presumably on the grounds that if they had time to hold down a job (even though it contributed to parish finances) it was time that should be spent on their parish responsibilities. And, yes, a priest’s wife could work, but should that income be considered their own as in any other family, or should it proportionally offset the parish’s support? The priesthood is the husband’s vocation after all and so to what degree should his wife, or older working children still living at home, be expected to subsidise his ministry? Again, this is all new ground for the Church.

As vocations to priesthood continue to decline in many countries, is it purely a sign of the times - times in which God’s call to priesthood or religious life tends to be drowned out by so many other “voices” - or do questions need to be asked as to whether the requirement of celibacy is proving to be a “bridge too far” for many potential priests who see their vocation not just to priesthood but possibly to marriage also?

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As a postscript to the issue of celibacy, the point was made very strongly in the television programme I referred to that despite claims to the contrary, studies, case histories and professional experience have shown that there are no direct connections between celibacy as such and child abuse by clergy.

To begin with, the instances of such abuse are statistically no higher among clergy than in the general population. Yes, poor administrative decisions have been made in the past by bishops and others, for the most part because the subject of child abuse wasn't as fully understood as it is today. Only in more recent years has it come to be recognised as a psychological disorder that is both insidious and incurable. As a result, abusing priests were not dealt with as they should have been and therefore abuse continued, but it shouldn't have, had we known what we know now. And, of course, the media has had a field day because paedophile priests makes for a much better story than those in society in general.

The abuse of children by priests has to do with personal psychological and emotional problems and not the issue of celibacy. The comforts and security afforded by priesthood have provided an ideal refuge for such people and, of course, it has given them ready access to children, children who trusted their priest. Only over time has their abhorrent behaviour come to light. While celibacy may have been a factor in some cases, if it were the only one then such priests would have been having affairs with adults, not abusing children. But the media has made that otherwise nebulous connection simply because it makes a good story. This has resulted in the totally unjustified calumny of Catholic priests in general by giving the impression that they are all potential abusers because (so the argument goes) a choice for celibacy is suspect and therefore celibates must be too.

Hopefully a priest's choice for celibacy will at least be respected even if it isn't always fully understood. The psychological causes of paedophilia are an entirely separate issue that occur throughout society in celibates and non-celibates alike. The sadness for the Church, and the tragedy for the victims, is where the two have coincided within the priesthood, but no longer is it being swept under the carpet – in the Church anymore than in society. Meanwhile we priests are trying to carry out our ministry in the way God calls us despite sometimes being little boats in a rough sea.

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