

The meaning of celibacy

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meant to be lived, it comprehends
all that is human.

Statistics of decreasing priestly vocations are alarming, even when corresponding decreases are reported by Protestant churches, by the Anglican Church, and by the Orthodox Church, in all of which priests may marry. It suggests that, at least in our affluent Western Society, the vexing problem is not so much celibate life as vocation to the priesthood. In the eastern countries the situation is totally different. In Poland, there are some ten thousand candidates to the priesthood, and there is no noticeable celibacy crisis among them. In the other satellite countries, as in Russia, only a small percentage of aspirants to the priesthood or religious life are admitted.

In keeping with our usual regional vision, let us limit observations to our own countries. The numbers speak in a realistic and authoritative language and warn dilettante futurologists that, conceivably, the Christian people might die starving for God's food. Let us stop and think: hungering for what food? Certainly not for the Eucharist alone, which for the moment can be celebrated only by celibate priests; certainly not for sacramental absolution, since everything imaginable is done on the part of the clergy to convince the faithful that these particular pangs of hunger are a luxury if not a delusion. Much more, and first of all, people hunger

for the authentic, unadulterated, shining word of God which, we must admit, has become scarce as food does in times of famine, and the synthetic substitute offered wholesale has no nourishing content. The Christian people still have retained a healthy instinct for good, genuine spiritual bread, and they have stopped queuing up at *ersatz* markets. The synthetic bread, with which the faithful are widely fed in sermons and catechesis, is sham which cannot allay real hunger.

And thus, the statistical numbers are confronted by another Christian reality: the reality of starving faithful, who cannot be satisfied save by the authentic Word. This, however, cannot be communicated except by one who has identified his life with the cause of the Word, who through total commitment has gained participation in the radiant strength and living effectiveness of this Word—"living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:13)—and who thus becomes a "multiplier" who can laugh at all human statistics because heavenly mathematics has taken over. Some seeds fall on the footpath and are eaten by the birds of the air, some fall on rocky ground and finding no soil wither away, some fall among thorns and are choked by the rank growth. But some fall on good soil and these yield thirty, sixty, and hundredfold. And thus the seemingly devastating defection of the defectors is balanced out. One is reminded of the words of Heraclitus: "One is worth a thousand when he is noble, *aristos*."

We might take time to pit these two realities against one another: statistics vs. the gospel, quantity vs. quality, or, to use Peguy's categories, politics vs. mysticism. Or to put it still another way: functionaries *versus* saints who, seen by secular eyes, are easily categorized as illusionaries and enthusiasts, because they take seriously the paradox, "when I am weak I am strong." But when we juxtapose these realities we also have to point out that the Church must think in earthly-realistic terms: in considering her new growth of priestly vocations, she must take into account the sparseness of the human soil, the thorns and stones, the asphalt-covered streets. Her dove-like simplicity cannot cancel out her serpent-like wisdom. She has to challenge her noblest, the *aristoi*, without forgetting that she also has to deal with average, "blue-collar" priests.

This perplexing "yes-but" approach might give the impression that we endorse the oft-advanced, ambivalent

solution: celibate clergy, probably in the minority, and *virī probati*, most likely in overwhelmingly majority—a topic which, like the water jar of the Danaids, is bottomless and when argued by non-professionals is fruitless. Because, unquestionably, we would have to examine every single proposition in favor of the *virī probati*, and in Latin America these are quite different from Africa and, even more so, here. Among other things we would have to study the history of the separated churches and how their clergy fared, and would have to take to heart the experience of the eastern church in learning all about the pastoral, juridical, and financial problems of the eastern married clergy—which are so obviously complex that more than one uniate bishop does not use his authority to ordain married priests anymore.

We decline to become involved with these questions since our topic is a different one, "Priestly vocation and celibate life today." Still, we retain one negative statement from the foregoing argument: it will never be permissible or possible that the celibate priesthood become one of two equivalent modes of life of the Church's shepherds—and then, presumably, become the exception to the rule. The Church is not that democratic in her structure. This structure rests on the foundation of the apostles and prophets; it is supported by the "columns of my temple"; it rests on the principle of representation of the many by the few, beginning with Christ. When St. Paul says: "I wish all were like me," unmarried, he does not imply one of two alternatives but unmistakably gives preference to one of the two, to a life thrown as a whole into the fire of Christ, ablaze like glowing iron. The *virī probati* are cold iron, no matter how zealous they might be personally. The unmarried shepherd is the glowing iron and he alone can communicate his radiance to others. Catechesis by married priests and by laymen (possibly more by the latter) is unlikely to kindle vocations to the unmarried priesthood. One begets one's likeness; one recommends his own. Only the word and example of celibate priests can awaken the generosity of total dedication in young people.

We hear these things said to us today by Protestants in the example of Taizé and by those who warn us of giving theologically an overemphasis to Christian marriage at the expense of celibacy, rather than seeing marriage in the light of the sacramental virginal relationship of Christ and his Church (J.-J. von Allmen). Orthodox and Uniates warn us of

the illusion of a more effective apostolate by a married clergy. The bishop, the model of the clergy, is always unmarried in the eastern church, and in most uniate churches marriage is forbidden after higher orders. The Syro-catholic church prescribes celibacy for all priests and the Coptic church for all higher orders. The Armenian national church recommends that bishops should ordain married men only exceptionally and advises continence to all priests (Mörsdorf, "Zölibat," LThK² 10, 1398).

Why this widespread, alert awareness of the superiority of celibacy? Is this time-bound? Can this be outgrown? Can it be emasculated or abandoned under the pressures of the contemporary situation? This is the crux of our particular consideration.

The preferability of celibacy

The reasons for the preferability of celibacy, even in the present situation, are set forth in the following. Obviously, these reasons are centered in the positive revelation culminating in Jesus Christ. They are "supernatural" and can therefore be comprehended only by those whose faith is alive, who possess a sensorium for Christian truth. This is not in contradiction to *gratia supponit naturam*. There are also natural grounds for a decision that reaches so deeply into the life of a man, as E. Schillebeeckx particularly emphasizes and elucidates. This position is not based on a platonic-manichean contempt for the flesh. It is a truly human potential to dedicate one's life completely to a great undertaking, be it scientific research, political mission, or something else, sacrificing for it the chance of marital happiness. Celibacy for the kingdom of God rests on these grounds, even if there might be additional or new motives.

Both the natural and the requisite supernatural motivation have to play an obligatory role in priestly formation. Dogma, exegesis, pastoral studies must be taught so that discernment is induced and is given a sound basis, which cannot be done in a broad study-plan but must be fostered by frequent and varied approaches. This would demand that professors, rectors, and spiritual directors work together and in the same spirit; that reasons for priestly celibacy be not merely hung on extraneously, in a superficial manner easily refuted by modern psychology and sociology, but that they be

presented as inseparably bound with the innermost of revelation and faith.

This, of course, would also demand that our students of theology have a wider and more composed range of vision, freed from slogans and propaganda, and that they possess some inner clarity and calmness with which Buddhist monks—for completely different reasons but with no less insight into the integral composition of being—opt for celibacy. If this quietude and contemplative insight are not present, then the substance of the revelation, the nature of Christ, and his Body the Church will not become manifest. Everything will be projected to an alien sociological plane which by changing the premises, the basic principles, distorts the subsequent revelation.

Just as Buddhist rationale cannot be transcended on its own plane, true Christian motivation is not made obsolete by changes in the modern world. It is not subject to obsolescence. This does not mean that there have not been some time-bound reasonings, based on what seemed obvious to the medieval people's church and based on the security of an unchallenged cultural framework. Hence, the life of a celibate priest is more difficult and, from a human point of view, more frustrating today than it was in earlier times.

However, the sociological problemlessness of past eras—which could be compared to the "law" in St. Paul—was transitional; it did not flow from the evangelical source. It is quite possible that the original evangelical contradiction is emerging full force now in the present difficulties. In fairness to today's priest candidates one must admit that the seeming ease of the past—about which we should have no illusions—was an obscuring of the genuinely Christian rather than a norm compared to which present standards fall short.

Let us recapitulate the principal reasons for priestly celibacy, reasons which derive directly from God's revelation in Jesus Christ, independently of all cultural trends and all historical situations in the Church.

1. The Church is present wherever she is alive, and she is always in the act of becoming. The millennia do not count. The act of generation from the mortal wounds of Christ does not stop. The Holy Spirit bridges all spans of time.

The Eucharist manifests daily the one and only and forever event of the cross and resurrection. Conjointly with this, the priestly office also begins always from the beginning, fresh through all traditions. It starts with the invitation of the disciples on the Jordan and in Galilee, with an unconditional call to following, to be answered by prompt rising and leaving everything behind. It begins with a promise to the sinner—who wanted to withdraw—to make him a fisher of men once he abandoned the state of misunderstanding, hesitation and, yes, denial.

However, the task is not merely to fish men from the bitter sea of the world, as Origen says, but, more, to care for the saved ones, placing them into a new milieu, leading them into the fresh air of the mountain on which they will dwell from now on; to create for them a new surrounding, ever renewed by the loving readiness and devotion of the Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep.

No less than this is promised to Peter and to his successors (as Peter clearly conveys to us in his first Epistle): he must love the Lord more than the others do, and disposed or not, he must follow the Lord to death on the cross, must offer his life with the Lord for his own, so that they be nourished by his lifeblood, as the legendary pelican chicks are from the breast of their mother.

This "predicament" of self-investment has been part and parcel of the office of the priesthood from the very beginning. The first Pauline epistles apply the word, *kopian*, laboring with total exertion, to those in authority (1 Thess. 5:12). These origins precede the (basically fatal) separation of secular priesthood and the state of evangelical counsels. The differentiation in emphasis slipped in later: the secular priest was seen as the bridegroom of the bridal community, while the religious priest was cast into the role of the bride waiting for the divine bridegroom. However, these subtleties are secondary, compared to the demand of complete identification with the Lord who is sent by the Father to give his life for his sheep so that they may gain life, and who calls his fellowmen to participate in his sacrifice.

This approach also precedes the so-called disentanglement of service and celibacy. Originally, entering the

service of the Lord simply meant to enter his mode of life, totally conformed to his service. He gives his flesh and blood for the life of the world and this flesh and blood is untouched, unhandled by marital intercourse, and unclaimed by any private commitment. The eucharistic sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is inseparably united with his celibacy. Because of this, we must caution against claiming that the sacrifice of celibate life is a special, mysterious charism, which a person either has or does not have; and if he does not have it, he can render in the married state the service demanded by the Lord.

Such an opinion was set forth in some of the drafts of the 1972 Synod of Bishops, but it was dropped as the manifold inner relationship between pastoral care and celibate life was clarified. "When someone"—says the document—"by free decision commits himself to total availability, he will accept the celibate life freely. The priest-aspirant should not feel that this is forced on him from the outside, but rather that this is the expression of his free self-giving, which is accepted and confirmed by the bishop."

I know that St. Paul used the word "charism" when he said: "I should like you to be as I am . . . (1 Cor. 7:7), but clearly, he does not use the word in the technical sense in which we are apt to use it, and certainly not as a challenge to the then prevailing customs of the Church. Everyone knows that the pastoral letters introduce us to ordained married men and that the "manifold inner relationship" between ordination and celibacy developed with traditional church law. No one maintains that it could not be otherwise. But one may say: It is best so.

The Church made this decision as a result of thoughtful meditation—repeated throughout the centuries—on the call of the original apostles. In this vocation no one can distinguish between "might" and "must." The question whether John or James would have sinned had they not answered the invitation to follow the Lord simply cannot be asked. Anyone who refuses to bear the immense burden of divine love that descends on him with this invitation loses his only reason for existence, as did the rich young man. The invitation of the Lord is not divisible, to include or not include the charism of virginity; it is always addressed to the

whole man, flesh and blood. (This goes far beyond the painful decision-making which burdens directors of candidates to the priesthood: whether this one or that one will "make it," and of which, incidentally, the above mentioned Pauline words also bear a trace.)

Unquestionably, Christ wants the whole man. Only the whole man can transmit credibly throughout the ages the wholeness of the message of God's total love.

2. Christian celibacy is often spoken of as "an eschatological sign." This is well and good, except for the article "an." Actually, it is "the" sign, and as such it becomes indispensable.

The new and eternal covenant values sexuality entirely differently from the old one. In the old covenant it pertained to the messianic hope, as the book of Tobit teaches us with great delicacy. But with the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary, with Jesus' virginal life, with his death, his descent to hell and his resurrection from the dead, a totally new theological situation has arisen. Sexuality has arrived at its internal end; the continuance of the race has reached a certain theological insignificance. This, however, should not be overplayed or obscured by applying evolutionary theories to the history of the Church.

At this point it might seem that the New Testament justifies demoting the idea of propagation as the primary purpose of marriage and gives preference to the mutual love of marriage partners (even when propagation is definitely out.) Such marital love seems to be more explicitly symbolic than is celibacy of the mutual love of Christ and his bride the Church in the eucharistic offering of his flesh and blood.

But such a theological approach loses sight of the *memoria passionis* which is at the core of the eucharistic love of Christ and his Church: the total painful sacrifice of the cross in which alone God's love is fully manifested, and therefore, the pattern of which must be present in all love that is a symbol of the sacramental sign or image of that love.

The fruitfulness of Mary, the fruitfulness of the apocalyptic woman, who between heaven and earth gives

birth to the messiah and to his members and brothers through all eternity, bears the marks of the Passion: the woman cries aloud in birth pain. This woman who later (but does this mean in time?) is transported to the desert, is the prototype of the Church, her ontological form. And it is not a matter of choice but an ontological necessity that this, her innermost reality, should also be existentially represented by those who represent the Church officially. Otherwise, the ontological reality of the Church becomes concealed behind a sociological model manipulable by men.

Thus, that Protestant critic was right who reminded us to view New Testament marriage from the premise of all-embracing virginity, and attempt to transform sexual *eros* into the divine gift of *agape*: *agape* that is exemplified by Christ in his flesh. And lest Christ be degraded again into an abstract principle without existential consequences, we, as Catholics, must see him always in relationship with his human helpers, who together form an elect circle and with whom his mission is inseparably united: the undoubtedly virginal precursor John, whose life crosses his so memorably, the Mother Mary, whose physical and spiritual relationship to Jesus can never be thought of as narrow or limited, the favored disciple who with nearly feminine self-surrender binds himself to the Lord's word and love, and finally, Paul, the first and greatest model of "mission" in the developing Church, whose figure became in the mind of the Church the archetype of the apostle and who was most instrumental in bringing about recognition of the priestly office and celibacy as an existential unity. In this constellation the virginity of Christ reveals itself in its reality and dynamics, powerfully impressing following generations.

3. The fruitfulness of Jesus in his Eucharist, the fruitfulness of the Virgin Mary who brings forth God Incarnate on earth, spell out clearly that Christian virginity is not body-hating, spiritualistic, platonic or manichean, but on the contrary, is focused on the incarnation of the Word of God. And, if in the course of the Church's history some platonic reasonings were used to undergird Christian celibacy, or if here and there disparagement of marriage was heard (contrary to the teachings of the pastoral letters and of the Lord himself), or

vilification of sexuality cropped up, we should be grateful that such alien growth has been extirpated and that the specifically Christian motives have become evident again in their pristine validity, which they have retained and will retain throughout the Christian era.

Lifting of the so-called taboo shows sexuality in a somehow sober reality. Its relative value, which is similarly sober, is encompassed and shielded in the vastly more sublime fruitfulness that God gave mankind in paradise. Surely, this must have been more than sexuality, which it contained in a—to us—unimaginable manner. But it was in no way limited to sexuality as we know it. Only when man lost this exalted, grace-full fruitfulness by turning from God did he perceive his nakedness and did the all-but-hidden sexual fruitfulness, in its superior form securely shielded, step out into the glare. Sexuality is a good but, in isolation, a deficient aspect of the original design of grace-filled mankind's fruitfulness. Because of the cross of Christ, the integration and wholeness of human fruitfulness can be regained only through sacrifice. I have said this already earlier and cannot elaborate further on it here.

At this point another essential thing becomes evident: With Jesus' sacrifice in the new eschatological covenant, Christ and his circle regain the potential of the highest degree of fruitfulness and they experience this in faith. Christ is the one who simultaneously renounces and gives, and who in the Eucharist creates the unfathomable experience of bodily self-giving. In the Marian grace, which is proffered to the whole Church, the state of virginity is bound up with fruitfulness and maternity, and, hence, with physical love and sharing. This statement might seem extravagant to modern psychologists and sociologists, and yet, the one who has faith understands it easily.

It puts an end to—and this is important—the interminable chatter about the celibate clergy not being able to understand married life, married joy, and married worries, which therefore makes it desirable, and for the Church enriching, to have besides the celibate clergy also a married clergy. Such talk, if consistent, will not stop even before Christ, the Wisdom of God, and before Mary, the Seat of this Wisdom.

If celibacy is lived as it is meant to be lived, in Christian joy, poverty, self-giving, and openness to God and men, it comprehends all that is human. (We can see this plainly in the person of a good pastor or a good religious.)

4. Lastly, the celibate priest today has to be stronger than his predecessor. He is placed in a sexualized environment and, generally, is deprived of the external guards of the post-tridentine seminary and protected rectory. He is exposed, while the witness of his life is rejected or is met with indifference by non-Christians. He does not get anywhere with it, it does not communicate anything to the people around him. The mighty effort of his witness seems to vanish into emptiness. Hence, he feels frustrated.

But the history of Christian virginity does not begin with Trent. It begins in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome, to mention only three of the most licentious cities of antiquity. Exactly there, where sin flowered most lushly—and the letters of the Apocalypse show us other telling examples—has Christian virginity its beginning. Not in cloisters, not in closed Christian communities, but in a diaspora where Christians lived scattered, often in pagan households. It *had to be* and it *came to be*.

Christian virgins did not live in closed communities, but like members of secular institutes today, they lived dispersed in households and families. It is there that they gave witness, and were perhaps a more fruitful leaven than the later, structured cenobitic communities of Pachomius and Benedict. They understood that their witness has a purpose in itself: it radiates love. It is not something useful, a means, even though it frees the unmarried for the Lord, to be “concerned about the things of the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:34), and thus also frees him for diaconal and presbyterial tasks of the Church.

And if the virgins of earlier periods were respected while the celibates of today are ignored or scorned, let us once more point out that virginity and the cross, and hence disgrace, are closely related. In the Old Testament barrenness was a humiliating disgrace, and rightly so both from a natural and a supernatural, theological viewpoint. The barren woman

did not contribute to the messianic future. Under the sign of disgrace stood also Mary, pregnant and silent, when Joseph thought of abandoning her.

New Testament virginity should be highly and specially valued by Christians because of this implicit disgrace, and precisely because of disgrace in the eyes of the world. But when Christians themselves do not see this hidden value, because they follow unchristian ideologies, then virginity must again recede into the obscurity of the original disgrace. The darkness of apparent waste, which is the radical sign of Christ's cross, the dimness of ever-increasing, seemingly meaningless, toil and vexation—be it the plight of keeping house without a competent housekeeper, or living with other priests in a poorly functioning community, or some other burdensome inconvenience—makes us wish to give up this incompetent experiment that seems to be of no benefit to anyone.

Perhaps in a church of the future celibate priests will be in minority. It could be so. But it also might happen that through the example of the few a new certainty of the rightness and indispensability of this life is kindled in the Church. We might have to go through a period of hunger and thirst, but this very deprivation might call forth new vocations or, rather, might inspire a new generosity, so that the call that is always with us will be answered.

We can trust the instinct of the Christian people. Despite superficial and poor training, the faithful usually manage to distinguish between “progressivist” small talk and truly inspired preaching and catechesis. And even if this instinct would become blinded—and I do not believe it will—the Lord, the true witness of our witnessing, remains with us. Because none of us priests “lives as his own master and none of us dies as his own master . . . , both in life and in death we are the Lord's” (Rom. 14: 7ff).—*Translated by Andrée Emery.* □