

The signs are accumulating too massively to be ignored: books and articles of every quality on the celibacy of priests keep coming out; a conference held at Marianhill under the auspices of the Association of Catholic Seminary Staffs of South Africa was directly requested by the South African hierarchy to consider the desirability of changes in the celibacy laws (*The Tablet*, 19th October, 1968); the Dutch bishops at the conclusion of the first national meeting of the Dutch Catholic clergy have declared that they will seek to promote the realization of a proposal for married clergy in the Church (*The Tablet*, 9th November, 1968); the French group of priests *Echanges et Dialogue* characterizes the new style of life of priests for which they are campaigning by four features, one of which is the option to marry (*The Tablet*, 23rd November, 1968, 11th and 25th January; *Herder Correspondence*, January, 1969). And so on. What do these signs portend? What is their deeper meaning?

It is tempting to see this new demand for the right of priests to marry as another expression of our changed, more organic, more joyous view of human sexuality. This may well be a factor, but there would seem to be an even more important one. This particular demand must surely be taken within the context of a general contestation of received forms of community and ways of relating to others right across the board. All the talk of community, community as one of the key contemporary values, is but the obverse of an immense dissatisfaction with the social and communal formulas hitherto experienced. And in the ensuing dissolution and fluidity, two sometimes contradictory results emerge: there is an ever greater need for an anchor, at once a base and a model, a quiet centre and a miniature of the larger society; conversely, however, the strains imposed on both the smaller and the larger communities are proportionate to the expectations aroused in this way.

What seems to be in question, then, is an eruption from the collective depths within each individual, which arises to the extent that archetypal relationships become detached from their hitherto accustomed vectors. We live in between a time when these collective needs within us had one—rough and ready, working—set of local habitations and names and a time when we work out another—no doubt equally rough and ready, working—set of local habitations and names.

If this analysis is in any way accurate, then it becomes clear why

the demand for the right of priests to marry cannot be taken in isolation. Many other decisions and factors are implicated.

At the level of ideas, we have to go on asking and working out precisely how and to what extent we are social and/or solitary beings, what sort of society we want, and therefore, ultimately, what we mean by happiness, what we really and deeply want and expect—but also what it is foolish to want and expect of any merely human community this side of the grave. Is Utopia merely a dream, a partially realizable and privileged anticipation and augury (the Hippie solution), or a programme (the Marxist solution)?

And at the level of practical initiatives and attitudes, the question is, what changes in our ways of living and relating and conducting our exchanges we are prepared to make and see. The abbot of Caldey spelled out the implications of a married clergy for the Church clearly in a review in this journal last September: 'It is the whole "system" that is being questioned; and the hard fact is that neither a deepening or understanding of celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom of God", nor a reform of seminary education, nor even the possibility of marriage and family life are going to contribute to a long-term solution unless the system within which the diocesan priest is expected to live and work is drastically overhauled. Such an overhaul will involve a profound change in diocesan and parochial structures, in relationships between bishop and priest, priest and people. It will require courageous experimentation with new forms of ministry: group ministries, priest-workers, auxiliary priests and deacons. It will require a massive handing over to the laity of non-ministerial functions in the Church. Within such a context, it is not fanciful to foresee the emergence of a married clergy working alongside and on equal terms with their fellow-priests who have chosen a celibate ministry.' Here lies the importance of the motion agreed to by the Dutch Pastoral Council in tacit allusion to the question of married clergy: 'When a situation is not yet ripe, the authorities should leave room for experiments and not impose definitive directives. The very sense of responsibility sometimes necessitates risks if the Church is to remain faithful to its mission in pluriformity: that of the people of God on the way' (*Le Monde*, 10th January, 1969; cf. *The Tablet*, 18th January, where the translation is somewhat different). At a time when the bishops are busy preparing their suggestions for the agenda of a synod that could affect us all, this is of some interest.

However all this may be, two things are certain. There will always be a call and a need for heroism in all walks of life and for what Father Schillebeeckx terms 'the religious experience of the overpowering might of the grace of God's kingdom'. And whatever structures we succeed in working out, there will always be misfits and mistakes, and terrible human waste. One can only hope that these, too, contribute to the growth of the kingdom—as dung, no doubt. P.L.