

## CELIBACY: A FINAL WORD

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The article on Celibacy which appeared in the March issue of *New Blackfriars* was written last October and followed up by the rest of my book *In Filial Disobedience*, published by Mayhew-McCrimmon in June. Since March I have received a good deal of comment, both favourable and unfavourable, and in the light of this it has seemed worth while to add a final piece responding in particular to the major objections raised very seriously and kindly by some people. Could a priest really be morally justified in rejecting the Church's law of celibacy with all the canonical consequences this entails? I have given my reply to that question the form of an article in the *Summa Theologica*. It is, hopefully, my last public contribution to the debate. This is not the most important subject for the Church today by any means, and yet it is a very important one both for its own sake and because it affects so many others. It is the key to a more flexible restructuring of the ministry. Yet if there is one thing which has grown in my mind in the last months it is the conviction that a law of so massive a nature, so tenaciously maintained by Rome with such powerful sanctions, cannot be defended or criticised primarily in terms of pragmatic pastoral advantage and disadvantage, whether in Europe or in Africa. It must be regarded primarily as a semi-doctrinal statement and one profoundly significant for the understanding and the misunderstanding of holiness.

*Videtur quod.* It seems that a secular priest may not marry.

- 1 Jesus was celibate. A priest should imitate Jesus as closely as possible because of his calling to be another Christ. In the words of Cardinal Hume, 'Our Lord was celibate. Whatever reasons were important to him, I want to make mine'. (*Searching for God*, p. 52).
- 2 A celibate clergy has so many clear advantages that its imposition by the Church is fully justified. First of all, celibacy goes with prayer and provides time for it. Secondly, celibacy provides availability. The availability of married men for pastoral work is inevitably greatly reduced by the needs of their families. Thirdly, a celibate clergy costs far less and the Catholic Church, already short of money, could not afford married

priests, at least without cutting back on other important commitments.

- 3 On no point has the position of Rome been more consistent. At the Reformation while it often expressed willingness to laicise married priests or to take back to the ministry those who gave up their wives, it was never willing to allow any to continue as married priests in its communion.
- 4 Priests are forbidden to marry by Canon 132. A cause is not served by disobedience to recognised existing law, in the Church above all. This is particularly true for priests. Even if positive disobedience to the law, canon law included, may in very special circumstances be justified, there is no sufficient degree of injustice or urgency to do so in this case.
- 5 Whatever the case against the law of celibacy in general and whatever justification there may be at times for breaking laws non-violently, it cannot be morally right to break one's own public commitment taken for life. The basic duty of fidelity to one's 'fundamental option', comparable with the marriage vow, is here at stake.

*Sed contra.* Against this is what St Paul says in I Timothy 3: 2-5: 'Now a bishop must be above reproach, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome and no lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's Church?'

*Respondeo.* I reply that according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council the Church's "teaching office is not above the word of God but serves it" (Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, art. 10). While St Paul's words in I Timothy are not decisive positively, that is to say they should not be taken to exclude the propriety of unmarried ministers (of which he was presumably one), they do appear to be decisive negatively. In their light the exclusion of all married priests by Canon law through almost the whole of the Catholic Church is deeply unjustifiable. The diversity of ministries within the Church is a necessary part of its catholicity and applies to the divide between the married and the celibate. It is not open to the Church to teach or legislate in such a way as to nullify the clear guidance of scripture which is what Canon 132 does. It is then essentially invalid.

This is not a matter of adhering rather fundamentalistically to a single text of the New Testament. It is rather a matter of not rejecting the whole steady practice of the New Testament Church. Further, it is a matter of whether the Church's practice, institutions and teaching do or do not sensitively reflect her central doctrines. It was from an understanding of the Incarnation, the basic implications of the word made flesh, that came the early Christian

conviction that 'what God has cleansed you must not call common or unclean' (Acts, 10, 15 and 28). Many other religions have attempted to sacralise certain areas of nature while regarding other areas (sex or certain foods) as impure and polluting. Christianity emphatically rejected any such discrimination. The word has shown all 'flesh' to be in principle good. Holiness is to be found through the spiritual and loving use of this creation, not through the systematic rejection of any part of it. This profound moral insight of the New Testament Church came to be gravely called into question in the area of sex from the third century, or even earlier, under Gnostic influence. Origen may have been the first major Christian writer to assert that sex as such polluted. This idea spread like wildfire through the Christian Church in the fourth century, particularly under the influence of monasticism. The impure came to be contrasted with the sacred. It was inevitably concluded by those succumbing to this view that those who had to touch the 'sacra' of the sacraments or who wished to commit themselves to the pursuit of holiness must necessarily be removed from the sphere of pollution (sex). Hence priests, whose marriages were then recognised as fully valid, were ordered to withdraw from sexual relations. An assumed incompatibility between sex and holiness, taken over from a non-Christian religious tradition, was the ground of the new legislation, which next prohibited priests from marrying or the married from being ordained. Here was a logically adequate explanation for a total law of priestly celibacy and there never has been any other. It is emphatically clear in the papal documents of the fourth century in which Popes Damasus, Siricius and Innocent first laid down the obligation and it comes out clearly in its defence for centuries afterwards. (See Jean-Paul Audet's *Structures of Christian Priesthood* or the massive *Sacerdos et Celibat* edited by J. Coppens, 1971; the latter is valuable particularly since it was published as a defence of celibacy; see in it especially the study by H. Crouzel of the early Church and that of J. P. Massaut on the sixteenth century apologist Josse Clichtove). This does not mean that there were not truly evangelical sources for the ideal of voluntary celibacy in the early Church, but those sources were not responsible and could not be for the transformation of a charism into a legally obligatory state imposed in thousands of cases upon very unwilling people.

If the law of clerical celibacy had indeed been truly but a matter of discipline, unlinked to scripture or theology one way or another and simply justified in terms of efficiency, then its validity might be argued irrespective of whether it was really a wise law. This cannot be the case for a law which is gravely counter-evangelical, having built into it (quite explicitly in the original papal decrees) a view of marriage incompatible with the gospels and the doctrinal teaching of the Church.

It is very much worth noting that the law of celibacy has been part of a wider system all of which is in principle derived from the same false presuppositions. Thus in the eleventh century the major effort of the Gregorian reform to enforce the law of celibacy seems to have coincided with the exclusion of the laity from communion of the cup: the two happened at the same time and with the same underlying motivation: the 'sacra' must not be touched by those having sexual relations in marriage. For the same basic reason communion of the bread was already being placed straight in the layman's mouth: it must not be touched by the hand. Lay communion of any sort became increasingly rare and was hedged around with instructions that sexual relations should not take place the night before—an injunction still being passed on in the twentieth century. These are, one and all, mysterious expressions of the un-Christian belief that sex in marriage pollutes. That such ideas are very prevalent in many religions does not make it the less true that they are fundamentally opposed to a Christian understanding of the world and of marriage in the light of the incarnation. It is then essentially the case that the rejection of the law of celibacy is not a decline from evangelical standards but their re-assertion. It may well be that the decisive moment at which the inner rationale of the law of celibacy was breached was when lay people were encouraged to come to daily communion.

None of this has anything to do with the charism of celibacy to which some are called in imitation of Jesus and which undoubtedly greatly contributes to certain forms of spiritual life and of ministry. The importance of this charism for the Church is immense. It may well constitute the most creative and prophetic area of Christian life. But a sustained freedom is of its essence. It has no specific relationship with the priesthood whatever. It is to be linked with prophecy rather than with the sacraments and with marginality rather than with ecclesiastical normality. More women have felt called to it than men and many men have been called to it who have not been called to the priesthood, among them St Benedict and St Francis.

*Ad primum ergo.* The celibacy of Jesus is one aspect of his life and its imitation 'for the kingdom' is highly commendable, but there are many different sides to Jesus' life and Christians are drawn to imitate him in a vast diversity of ways. As a matter of fact the New Testament does not advert explicitly to his celibacy, still less is it proposed as an example to be followed by the ordained.

Ad. 2. It is true that celibacy may make prayer a great deal easier at least by providing privacy and free time. By diminishing other close personal relationships it can stimulate the need for intimacy with God. It is true that the unmarried man may well have more hours in which to be available to others outside his home. It is true

that celibate priests are cheaper to maintain. It is also true that the laity too are called to serious prayer, that prayer is not made valuable by being 'easy' and that pastoral priests are not called to the more monastic pattern of prayer but rather to show the way to their flock by praying within the pressures of a busy life. It is true also that 'availability' is not chiefly a matter of a quantity of time but of the human capacity and maturity to handle the type of ministry needed. If the ministry is seen almost only in terms of administering the sacraments, there is little problem here. But when it is seen, as it must be, in much wider terms of teaching and counselling then the absence of experience of major areas of life may greatly diminish effective 'availability'. To raise the financial issue at all to justify a general law, though frequently done, seems to reveal a spiritual bankruptcy still more than a financial one. The admission of married priests would, however, go with considerable other changes in the structuring of the ministry and many married priests are likely to be self-supporting.

All these points are, however, irrelevant. There are undoubtedly many advantages in celibacy and there are many advantages in marriage. None of these advantages come anywhere near justifying a law one way or the other. Such arguments all point back to an either/or mentality which is simply less than Catholic because it replaces the diversity of many gifts and callings with an imposed uniformity. The Catholic Church needs to be seen to be Catholic and so does its priesthood. A merely celibate clergy or a merely married clergy is a great deal less than Catholic.

Ad. 3. The hardness of the Roman position on this matter has indeed arguably done more harm than on any other. It was a hardness not only against the Reformers but also against countless decent Catholic priests. Bishop Elphinstone, the excellent founder of the University of Aberdeen at the close of the 15th century, was the son of a priest, like St Aelred of Rievaulx and so many others. According to Canon law the unions of their parents were therefore not marriage. All had been living in a state of mortal sin and their children were illegitimate. The misery that this arbitrary law has brought to thousands of ordinary Catholic priests across the centuries is incalculable.

The experience of Catholic priests rejecting the law of celibacy, often with great anguish, was an important part of the Reformation. The intellectual and personal struggle that Luther, Zwingli or Cranmer had over this is clear and cannot be underestimated. Out of that struggle a positive spiritual tradition has grown and Christian reunion as a true coming together at the spiritual level of the alienated is impossible without Catholics accepting the morality of the marriage of priests just as it is impossible without Protestants accepting the profound rightness of the charism of celibacy.

Ad. 4. Positive law cannot bind when it is wrong in principle and gravely harmful in its effects. But such is the case here. It is wrong in principle because it expresses a twisted theology and goes flatly counter to scripture. It is harmful in its effects because it is causing the loss of many good priests to the ministry and is largely responsible for the extreme shortage of priests in many parts of the southern hemisphere. Karl Rahner has laid it down as an axiom that 'If the Church in a concrete situation cannot find a sufficient number of priestly congregational leaders who are bound by celibacy, it is obvious and requires no further theological discussion that the obligation of celibacy must not be imposed' (*The Shape of the Church to Come*, 1974). Yet such has long been the case in many dioceses in both Africa and Latin America as anyone who knows the state of the Church in those continents is aware. The Second Vatican Council has declared that 'No Christian community can be built up unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the most Holy Eucharist' (Decree of the Presbyterate, 6). Such a statement is made a nonsense by the present law and the attempt of Rome to suppress even its discussion. There are at present plenty of available ministers—carefully trained married catechists—yet the law is literally forcing tens of thousands of Christian communities in the less favoured parts of the world into a priestless and eucharistless condition.

When I urged the ordination of married catechists in *Church and Mission in Modern Africa* (1967) the pastoral situation was already manifestly grave. Twelve years later the number of Catholics has almost doubled while the total number of priests at work has been diminishing year by year through the 1970s (see the figures given by R. Laurentin, *Données Statistiques sur les Chrétiens en Afrique*, Concilium, June 1977, 119-31). It is to be noted too that a celibate clergy is in practice dependent on long years of training in major seminaries, institutions extremely vulnerable to political pressures. It only takes a hostile government for a seminary to be closed or tightly limited in its intake and the priesthood is simply squeezed out, as is happening in Lithuania. From this viewpoint too the situation is growing almost steadily more grave in many parts of Africa.

To conclude: positive law may rightly be broken when

- a) it is in itself seriously wrong;
- b) the matter is urgent;
- c) there is no way to bring about a change of law constitutionally and appeals to the legislators have been disregarded. All three conditions are here fulfilled.

It should be added that 'disobedience' in this matter is of an altogether special kind. It is not the challenging of public authority in the latter's proper field but the exercise of a profound personal right derived from natural law upon which Church authority

has illegitimately encroached. It is akin to the act of civil disobedience in South Africa involved in marrying a person of another race. In each case the 'disobedience' derives from an unacceptable invasion of the field of personal rights by public law. The length of time a law has been in force does not alter the fact that the '*ius possidentis*' remains with the individual.

Ad. 5. It may be the case that the vow of some religious to serve God in celibacy is to be seen as a 'fundamental option' in this way. Such, however, cannot be the case for a secular priest. It is not so by the nature of the priesthood and while, psychologically, some may have seen their vocation in this way, others have certainly not done so. A secular is called to serve God and his fellow men according to the nature of the priesthood. He takes no vow nor oath of celibacy but accepts the obligation imposed by Canon law. A young man takes it for granted that the Church knows what it is doing and, if he feels emphatically called to the priesthood, he may accept almost any condition in order to reach it. This means that while he has taken on a serious obligation in celibacy, it is not different in kind from any other serious obligation one accepts under law with the presumption that it has adequate moral grounding. It is certainly in no way comparable with fidelity to one's marriage partner. It is worth while to compare the case of a priest in a religious order who becomes a secular. He has his vow of poverty dispensed—a far more solemn commitment than that of a secular to celibacy. Yet few would suggest that such a priest has failed in 'fidelity' or his 'fundamental commitment'. He has simply decided after mature consideration that his service of God needs to take a rather different form. So it is with the priest who keeps his priesthood but decides to marry, convinced that this is the way God wishes him to go.

Grave doubt upon the whole thesis of the 'fundamental option' is also thrown by the ease with which Rome now grants dispensations for the solemn vows of monks and nuns and laicised priests. If these obligation were really comparable with marriage vows this just could not be done.

One can fall away from one's fidelity to God or one can grow in it, but it is in general impossible to equate it with remaining in a particular state—whether of celibacy or of membership of a particular order or monastery. It is a condition of attentive service, of waiting upon God who may leave his servant in the same position all his life or may call him to some major change. Fidelity signifies a living and obedient relationship to God in freedom. It is not to be identified with unquestioning subservience to Canon law.