On Celibacy

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After much thought and prayer I have come to the decision that I am free as a Catholic priest to marry. I have come to this after long years of wrestling with myself and of pondering both the pastoral and missionary needs of the Church and the basic nature of the christian priesthood, marriage and freedom. I have for years argued persistently for a major change in the Church's position in this regard, a change which I see as absolutely crucial for the wider effectiveness and coherence of the *aggiornamento* set in motion by Pope John. It is only recently that I have come to the conclusion that in this matter as in others one cannot go on indefinitely simply affirming in print and in speech a point of view completely at odds with the structured ordering of one's own life. There comes a moment when it is morally necessary to pin oneself to the truth and importance of what one has affirmed to be true and important.

I have been a priest for twenty-two years. I accepted the obligation of celibacy at ordination without questioning because I wished to be a priest and this was the law of the Church, and I have kept it. In the cheerful, zealous, withdrawn atmosphere of a seminary it did not seem much of a problem. I was even convinced for a time that I did not want to marry, but for many years now I have wanted to very much. So this decision is first of all a response to an honest sense of my own need. Yet at present I am living happily with my mother; I have many dear friends, and I am extremely busy as a university lecturer and writer. I have certainly not come to this decision out of loneliness or depression or because I have lost interest in the Church or the Catholic priesthood. Quite the contrary.

I first became firmly convinced that the Church needed to change its discipline about fifteen years ago and so I wrote in the *African Ecclesiastical Review* of October 1964 urging 'the widespread ordination of tried and tested married men, such as the better trained catechists, to provide the Eucharist and the simple preaching of the Gospel. From then on I have repeated this appeal time after time in every way open to me, explaining at great lengths the grounds for it (see, for instance, the *Clergy Review*, January–March 1973; the *Tablet* 8 and 15 May, 1976), but over the years I have seen that what I first asked for was certainly not enough.

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Reasons which called for a married priesthood appeared to my mind of an ever wider and more compelling kind but for long I continued to hold that, whatever my personal inclinations, I must myself remain celibate precisely to put the case. Thus on 5th October 1969 I copied down a remark of Von Hugel's into my diary: 'Whatever one may think, *in abstracto,* of celibacy, a priest who abandons it puts himself out of court for pleading for the difficult reforms we require.' Hard as it might be to order one's own life by a rule one did not believe in, I was for long firmly convinced that in practice this settled the matter for me. On this, after almost interminable internal debate, I have changed my mind: partly because I am tired of having my own life controlled by a clericalism I detest; partly because verbal argument alone, however clearly put, is very easily disregarded by the powers that be. The very absence of democracy within the Church as it stands drives one from disregarded argumentation to deeds that may not be so easily forgotten.

I have recently celebrated the 22nd anniversary of my ordination and the 40th of my first communion. I made that communion at Stanbrook Abbey on the feast of Our Lady's birthday, the 8th September 1937. On its fortieth anniversary I was back at Stanbrook to thank God for all those years of receiving and communicating the Body of Christ, that food in whose strength I have walked for forty years. And in doing so I felt a profound sense of reassurance. These have been the central things in my life. From them, I do not, will not, could not, withdraw.

How then could I break a law of the Church forbidding me to marry, a law which I accepted with full consciousness when I was ordained in 1955? Because I do not believe it to be a just law or a good law, or a law which the Church had the right to make, and I am convinced that it does not express God's will for the Church today, if it ever did. Positive law is not to be despised but equally it is not to be idolised, and this applies very much indeed to canon law which is often made and enforced in a very arbitrary manner. Law is for man, not man for it. I am the son and the grandson of lawyers, and I have always held human law in the greatest respect; but the free conscientious, non-violent breaking of a law which is itself proving harmful and destructive, can be a valuable and redeeming action. So, at least, it would seem to me the Christ of the gospels teaches us. I accepted the law of compulsory priestly celibacy when young as an expression of God's will; convinced today that it is, on the contrary, a grave disservice to the Kingdom, I can contemplate breaking it without any sense of failing in fidelity to the God who has guarded, guided and blessed me all the days of my life.

The practicalities of this decision have been helped by the fact that I am now a university lecturer in religious studies. As a mis-

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sionary of sorts, an itinerant minister, there were very good reasons to be celibate, and I could hold freely to my celibacy because it made much sense in terms of the work I was actually given. That period of my life has now passed. As a university lecturer marriage appears as appropriate as celibacy did for a traveller living mostly far from his native land and on next to no salary. If the Church had given me other responsibilities I would not have wished to abandon them lightly and so let people down who depended on my immediate ministry, but it did not do so. As a consequence I find I have the responsibility instead to use my freedom in a way most other priests cannot do, to say something utterly vital about the priesthood without the likelihood of being immediately crushed.

I intend then, whether or not I marry, to continue with the grace of God to be a priest in the depths of my being and to serve as such as God guides me. That service has long been chiefly one of teaching through writing, and so it will continue. I have not the slightest desire to divide the Church sacramentally. There are in fact recognised married priests in the Catholic Church today, as there always have been, so there can as such be no scandal in a married man celebrating Mass. But I will certainly not do so except when I am truly wanted and such celebration is not divisive.

What, then, objectively are my reasons for taking this very grave decision? The first reason, and still for me in a way the clearest, is the simple and decisive one of the pastoral needs of the Church. The Church is centred on the Mass. The Eucharistic Body of Christ builds up the Mystical Body of Christ. No theology is more traditional and nothing was stressed more repeatedly by the Second Vatican Council. It has, ever since my doctoral thesis in Rome in the 1950s, been central to my own theology (see *One and Apostolic*, London and New York, 1963; *A Concise Guide to the Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, volume I, 1968). The whole weight of Catholic tradition and spirituality cries out for the celebration of the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day in every christian community. But this, as I experienced over long years in Africa, has become utterly impossible because of the great and growing lack of priests. It is not that there are not devoted people, trained ministers of the Church, available. There are. In Africa, for instance, the Church has many thousands of capable catechists, but they are married. The celebration of Mass in rural Africa today, despite the quickly growing number of Catholics, is an increasingly rare event. Many bishops have seen this absolutely clearly and have appealed to the Pope time after time for permission to ordain married men 'to answer the most elementary pastoral needs' (The joint hierarchies of Gabon, Chad, the Central African Republic, Congo-Brazza and Cameroon in July 1969). One bishop I know went year after year to plead for this in Rome always to be faced with the same hard refusal, though he had not a

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single ordained local priest in his diocese. The Pope, it seems, prefers that there be no Mass for countless people than that Mass be said by a married man, and so no Mass there is. It is spiritually very comfortable for me to go on saying my Mass in common with all the priests and bishops in their private chapels who are never deprived for a day of the Eucharist, but I have found it increasingly impossible to accept such an identification with the clerical 'haves'.

All this is equally true and has very long been true of Latin America. Today it is also becoming the case in many parts of France and Germany. Whatever the underlying reasons the consequence is to reveal ever more clearly an order of priorities dominated by a clericalism which sees the maintenance of universal priestly celibacy as more important than the basic pastoral and missionary needs of the Church. Such a state of affairs has become in my opinion a scandal of the highest order.

But the pastoral needs of today's Church by no means end there. Despite pressure from Rome through the ages the Eastern Uniate Churches have managed to maintain their ancient tradition of a married clergy to this day. However, millions of Uniates have emigrated from Eastern Europe to America and there they have been forbidden to continue this tradition and so have been alienated and frequently driven into schism. Again in the last years since the Council there have been deep conflicts between Rome and the Melkites and Ukrainian Catholics, and these largely relate to the refusal of Rome to allow a married clergy to develop in North America. Such a policy damages the tribute the Vatican Council paid to the Eastern Churches, produces a constant open wound within the Church, and also counteracts any further ecumenical proposal to bring Anglicans or Protestants into full communion with the Catholic Church on some sort of uniate model. Papal pronouncements about the acceptance of the legitimate rights and traditions of other churches as part of the process of achieving full communion seem little more than double-talk when within the Catholic Church as already constituted, a married clergy, characteristic of all other denominations, is so consistently resisted by authority. One cannot reasonably offer with one hand what one is refusing with the other.

Again, there are the lands where the Church is, and for many years has been, under persecution. In such countries it can be quite impossible to provide a celibate clergy only ordainable after long years of traditional seminary formation. As the priests of the diocese of Vilkaviskis, Lithuania, movingly petitioned their bishops in December 1968: 'The present seminary is obviously unable to fulfil the needs of the Lithuanian Catholic Church. Therefore a well-justified question arises: Who in the near future will proclaim God's Word? Who will give the sacraments? Who will officiate at

the Mass?' If the law of universal priestly celibacy remains in force, the answer to those questions may well be 'No one'.

Here in Britain there are now scores of priests who have married but wish to continue their ministry. In France there are hundreds, 'prêtres en foyer' they call them and many are saying Mass while the bishops avert their eyes. These are good men, some of them were among the best and ablest of the clergy, men who often enough went out with a quite special zeal to preach the Word and serve the needy in a secular world far away from that of the presbytery. It is a wretched experience to see one's friends leave the ministry and the bishops do next to nothing about it.

My conclusion is a simple one: in Britain, France and Germany, in Lithuania, among the Melkites in North America, in Africa, in Latin America, wherever one turns the clericalism which puts celibacy above ministry is strangling the Church.

Yet there is absolutely no reliable theological argument upon which to base a general law of priestly celibacy.[1] There are, most certainly, strong grounds for the recognition of the spiritual and practical value of celibacy as a freely chosen state for some who are called to it. Essentially this means members of religious orders, women or men, and the differentiation of 'religious' from the 'secular' or 'diocesan' clergy is one of the most enduring characteristics, and strengths, of Catholic ministry. Yet the value of that differentiation has been eroded by imposing celibacy, a characteristic of religious life, upon the whole priesthood by law and by nothing else than law. There is nothing in scripture, nothing in the early Church, nothing in the sound tradition of Catholic theology to justify this law. It grew largely out of a growing but heretical belief that sex was somehow of itself impure and that therefore even sex blessed in the sacrament of marriage was deeply unsuitable for an ordained priest administering the holy things of God. Yet God in Christ took to himself in principle the total *humanum*, all that is not sin. The religion of the Incarnation is not a religion of withdrawal but a religion of holiness within the 'flesh' of humanity. Priests must, in a very special way, represent the balance of Christ's message. If sex is necessarily sinful, then the marriage theology of the Church as it is taught today is nonsense. If it is not sinful but is, indeed, a central if difficult area of human growth and moral striving, then it seems impossible for it to be right that all christian priests opt out—be compelled to opt out—of the totality of marital relations and parental responsibilities.

This means, not only that there is no sound argument against a married clergy, but that there is a decisive positive argument in favour of a married clergy, if the gospel is not to be twisted.

[1] This is, maybe, why there is no such law: there is something particularly untheological about a general law of celibacy *within the Latin rite.*

The need is particularly pressing in our time. Marriage has always been with us but in the past there was a relatively stable society with agreed moral norms so that it could appear possible for the clergy to preach about situations fairly effectively even though they were never involved in them. Today this is simply not the case and if priests as a body are outside whole areas of life they can have next to nothing to say about them. Even if Pope Paul is right in his condemnation of all artificial forms of contraception, a clergy which has only to face the issues academically will never be able to convince a doubting laity. If then the clergy are as a whole to remain celibate, the consequence can only be (and is already) an ever growing marginalisation of the priesthood, a disastrous withdrawal into the limited fields of ritual and fund raising.

There is simply no way apart from a married priesthood whereby a clerically controlled Church can credibly demonstrate that it does not still regard the sacrament of marriage as at least one stage removed from the way of perfection. We need married priests not because marriage is easy and celibacy too hard for us, but because marriage is hard and at the same time the normal arena for the practice of christian virtue, including asceticism, while celibacy—unless it be linked with a really vigorous self-discipline all along the line—can easily become a way of life with very little moral challenge to it: too heavily compensated for by drink, overseas holidays, hours before the television set, and a generally rather egotistical pattern of off-duty behaviour, very different from that required of the family man. Of course there are scores of priests to whom this does not apply, but there is too much truth in it for celibacy as such to be a convincing proof of self-sacrifice and dedication.

The moral issue here relates to the whole height and depth of christian spirituality. The point is a very simple one: for christians one is not less wholly at the service of God because one is at the loving service of another human being, but only if one is not serving but dominating. The essence of the religion of Christ (as opposed to every form of gnostic or manichaean religiosity) is so to love neighbour—wife, husband, workmates, lepers, the oppressed—that one is indeed loving God and finding God. This central moral insight is immeasurably damaged by a law which compels the whole body of the ordained to opt out from so many relationships which as a consequence are inevitably devalued (as witness the tiny number of canonised saints who were married).

Existentially one can be convinced by this, not only by the lives of so many Catholic laity, including that dearest and wisest of saints Thomas More, but also by calling to mind holy married priests of other communions. When I hear Pope Paul declare a married priesthood an 'impossible or illusory' solution, I think of

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Michael Ramsey and so many other married priests of other churches and I wonder what he can possibly mean.

No less important a consideration is that of the position of women in our society. The Church, particularly the post-medieval Church, has continually devalued them, excluding them from all roles of importance. To a large extent secular society did the same and while this did not excuse the Church, it did in some way reduce the pastoral disadvantage of its all male-mindedness. Today with a profound revolution in the social relationship between the sexes in progress, it becomes more and more anomalous and disastrous that the Church be led not just by men only, but by men all of whom have spent their adult lives profoundly segregated from the other sex. It may seem a little thing to female liberationists to argue that at least some of the Church's male ministers should have learnt to understand the female mind through the wear and tear of married life, yet I cannot doubt that the effect upon the Catholic Church would be vast.

I am not arguing that all priests should ideally be married or that celibacy has no value. On the contrary, I disagree profoundly with the Reformation rejection of value in the life of celibacy. It is vital that freedom from marriage be asserted too—a freedom through which it is possible to attain human fulfilment, holiness and great happiness. I even feel that if it were necessary that all priests should be married or all celibate, I would still very reluctantly prefer the latter; but what we must do is to escape from the oppression of this either/or and return to the both/and which did exist in the early Church and is called for by any serious understanding of the diversity of gifts in the body and ministry of Christ. Celibacy is immensely valuable in a monastic community, in the missionary life, for shock troops in the Church's struggle against social injustice, and for certain quieter pastoral roles. But the fact that it is so obviously non-normal requires that here if anywhere the freedom of the gospel be strikingly manifest. Its true brilliance is horridly dimmed by the shadow of canon law. As a religious option it bears its own witness even to what marriage is all about—the love which transcends all particular forms. As a general clerical obligation it makes the whole splendid biblical analogy between the marriage of man and woman and the union of God and his people almost ridiculous, even a bad joke.

When one challenges the compulsory celibacy of all priests in the western Catholic Church, one is in truth challenging a development of many centuries, and one which relates not only to the Church's attitude towards marriage, women, sex, and the priesthood, but also to the whole stress of Roman institutional polity. One must not be blind to the wider ramifications of this. The law of celibacy is a key expression and condition of a particular kind of Latin clericalism and of the grip within the Church of men over

women, of clergy over laity, of Rome over all. It is a matter of power more than of anything else. Outside the context of Roman centralisation it is unlikely that the law of celibacy would ever have been made absolute or maintained as it has. Though it precedes the modern phenomenon of Ultramontanism, it is an essential component of Ultramontanism's predecessors, high Gregorianism and the Counter-Reformation spirit. The tide of clerical celibacy flowed in as part and parcel of the tide of Roman domination over the *Catholica*, and if one is utterly convinced that for the sake of the Catholic Church now more than ever that domination must be decisively challenged and from within, then it would be naive to exclude from that challenge the law of clerical celibacy.

The alternative to Ultramontanism is no less than Catholicity—the joyful recognition that a variety of social and cultural forms are the appropriate body for the realisation of the Spirit of God and the Body of Christ, while the reduction of this to a single Roman model is an oppressive caricature of the proper unity of Catholic Christianity. The renewal of the priesthood depends upon its diversification and its emphatic liberation from a manichaean theoretical substructure. Both are impossible while the law of celibacy remains. The task of reconciling Catholic priesthood with christian marriage is not a giving way to weakness, a concession to worldly times but a challenge to true ministry, to moral endeavour, to prayer and a positive asceticism, above all it must constitute a never too late recognition within the structures of the Church of what the doctrine of the Incarnation is all about—the acceptance of christian truth at its sharpest, of the coming together of word and flesh.

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