

DECLARATION ON

RELIGIOUS CELIBACY

Discussions regarding the celibacy of the secular clergy imply the need for fresh thinking on the real sense of "wanting to remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven." It is a matter which affects religious in a special way.

The Major Religious Superiors of Men, who jointly form the Association of Religious Priests in the Netherlands, wish to give testimony concerning this matter, not as men constituted with authority, but rather from a sense of responsibility towards their confreres and towards the faithful who have indicated that they need such testimony.

THE MEANING OF CELIBACY

There may be a number of reasons why a person decides to remain unmarried: he may do so because he believes that he can give himself more readily and more freely to the service of his fellowmen; he may remain unmarried in order to retain that freedom which enables him to go wherever people have appealed to him for help. In such cases one may speak of remaining unmarried for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, in these instances the heart of the matter — to remain unmarried in the evangelical sense — has not yet been touched.

This heart of the matter, the deepest motivation, lies in a special mode of experiencing God. A man's choice of the celibate state is truly evangelical only if in some way he believes (at least implicitly) and really experiences that God bestows Himself upon him in such a way that it is worthwhile to live in celibacy. God has passed in front of him, and although he has only "seen the back of God" (Exodus 33, 23), a lasting impression has been made of him.

Perhaps this is a hazardous way to speak of God. Nevertheless, we think that evangelical celibacy is essentially determined by our faith in such a view of God's relationship with man. Rather than emphasizing the life which will appear only after this present one, or a God who dwells outside our present world, we stress the Living God, the Father of Jesus Christ, who comes to meet us in this life and in this world, so that He may take complete hold of us. "He who is to come" may so totally grasp a man that he sets aside the deeply human values of the married state.

When viewed in this light of faith, celibate life may differ from person to person. For one it will bring a certain mobility by which he is enabled to go wherever he is needed; for another it will involve the experience of poverty, that is, a deprivation suited to a more effective apostolate; for another, it is a more explicit dedication to values, an awareness of the limitations of material things, a rebellion against the establishment. But it is not from these that evangelical celibacy derives its ultimate meaning.

Its ultimate meaning is derived *from God* and refers back *to God*. The touchstone of evangelical celibacy is this: it serves as a constant reminder to all the faithful (including those who are married) that man's existence has meaning only in the ultimate mystery of God.

We think it advisable to draw attention to this latter motive in our choice of evangelical celibacy. Has it not become clear that our contemporaries have questioned every other motive for celibacy? Would not the uneasiness of many celibates originate in the fact that this motive of the ultimate mystery of God has never entered into their choice, or has become dimmed over the years?

Nevertheless, even if the choice of celibacy is well and deeply motivated, the celibate realizes that he is in an embattled position, because more than in past times, our faith is an embattled faith. Therefore, it is no surprise that in the present faith-situation, there has arisen the dual crisis of prayer and celibacy. These two are related to one another: in either case it is a question of attention to Him who has revealed Himself in our life. This explains why religious celibacy cannot endure without a life of prayer.

It ought to be quite clear that those who choose evangelical celibacy and who live it together in community, as religious do, are not for that reason more Christian or more evangelical than others who want to serve God in and through their marriage. It is not a question of being *more* or *less*, but of being *different*. Therefore, it is not a command, but an invitation.

Will such a life lead to movement in the Church, to social commitment, to protest against injustice? We hope it will. He who says he has seen the Lord cannot leave unjust the injustice he discovers about him. His ecclesial and social involvement can become the gauge of the sincerity and depth of his choice. It is because of this involvement that in a particular period of history some religious may feel called to work for the separation of the secular priesthood from enforced celibacy, both for the sake of the secular clergy and for the sake of the state of evangelical celibacy, which can be understood only in terms of freedom and voluntary preference.

But religious cannot apply to their own lives this separation of celibacy and priesthood, since their state is precisely characterized by the free and unconditional surrender to Him who has revealed Himself.

We have already stated that it is incorrect to equate the celibate state, chosen for the sake of the Kingdom of God, with the integral living of the Gospel message, for both married and unmarried persons can live the Gospel in a radical manner. Perhaps our present time is seeking — just as in the past — for modes of life in which married and unmarried people can orientate themselves together towards a concrete evangelical ideal.

We think that it does not make sense to bring together into one common life two such different ways of life, and to do this in a manner that is unsatisfactory to everyone.

This applies all the more to those who, after having belonged to a religious community, have subsequently decided to get married. It is our opinion that they ought to withdraw themselves from their former community life for a considerable period of time in order to search for

the "heart" of their new existence. Thence they ought to test the sincerity of an eventual choice of a radically evangelical life.

Some may argue against these views, that our testimony concerning the deeper basis of our mode of life does not sufficiently take into consideration the actual facts of contemporary life. Is this really so? Our testimony is a testimony of faith; faith always implies a certain ambiguity. It speaks of invisible things that have nevertheless been seen; it speaks of future things that have already begun.