

DOCUMENTATION

STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF THE PHILIPPINES ON PRIESTLY CELIBACY

Grace and peace be yours from the Lord.

The celibacy of the Catholic priest is a subject that is very much discussed today. Not only religious publications but even the secular press often speak of it. Since not everything that is said is well said, We wish to address to our fellow priests and to our people a few words on the subject.

The Catholic priesthood, because of its own nature as this is understood by our faith, is a unique state of life, different from any other priesthood that exists today or that has existed, in the past. St. Paul condensed its meaning and its function when he said: "People must think of us as Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God." The words of the great Apostle sound like an echo of those of the Master: "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you" or again: "You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last." The fruit that Christ had in mind was faith in Himself, the Redeemer and Saviour of the world, for He said: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... I pray not only for these, but for those also who through their words will believe in me."

By the powers granted by Christ to his priests in the work of salvation, the power to teach, the power to forgive sins, the power to baptize and incorporate a person in his Body, the power to consecrate his Body and Blood, the power to administer the other means of grace, the priest becomes in reality the ambassador of Christ, the other self of the Mediator between God and man.

On account of this ambassadorship by which he becomes a living and visible instrument of Christ's mediation, the Church expects from the priest a total and complete dedication of his life to the salvific mission of his Master. We cannot think of Christ engaged in any kind of work after He started his public life other than the work of salvation. The priest, his ambassador and his other self, is expected to imitate his Lord and Master, to give himself totally and completely to the all-absorbing task of guiding the people of God to the glory of their Father and dispensing to them the mysteries of God.

The program of life of the Catholic priest was traced by Christ when He said: "Anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Writing to Timothy, St. Paul elaborates: "Put up with your share of difficulties, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. In the army, no soldier gets himself mixed up in civilian life, because he must be at the disposal of the man who enlisted him."

St. Paul has always been presented by the Church to her priests as a model of priestly and missionary life. Here is what he had undergone to fulfill his mission: "I must be mad to say this, but so am I (a servant of Christ), and more than they (those who were boasting of their achievements): more because I have worked harder, I have been sent to prison more often, and whipped so many times more, often almost to death. Five times I had the thirty-nine lashes from the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked and once adrift in the open sea for a night and a day. Constantly travelling, I have been in danger from rivers and in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from pagans; in danger in the towns, in danger in the open country, danger at sea and danger from so-called brothers. I have worked and labored, often without sleep: I have been hungry and thirsty and often starving; I have been in the cold without clothes. And to leave out much more, there is my daily preoccupation my anxiety for all the churches. When any man has had scruples, I have had scruples with him; when any man is made to fall, I am tortured."

In all that, can anyone imagine St. Paul giving also his heart and his energies to any other human bond, however legitimate and worthy in itself? Of course, not all priests will be called upon by the Lord to be whipped, to be shipwrecked, to be imprisoned and to be stoned. But a good priest must surely possess the dedicated spirit of St. Paul, that spirit which made him give himself entirely to the work entrusted to him and which he described in all its poignant intensity when he said in Miletus to the elders of the Church of Ephesus: "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus; to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God." And it is this spirit that makes the Catholic priesthood different from any other profession or vocation on earth. When one works as a professional, an artisan or a businessman, he allots a certain portion of his day—say, eight hours, to his work and the rest of his time he gives to his family or his leisure. At the same time, for the great majority, the "work" is done in order to maintain the family and rear and educate the children. The work is only a means; the family is the ultimate human reason. On the other hand, a priest may put upon the door of his office a schedule of "office hours", but this does not mean that these are the only hours he sets aside for God and His people. It is still a twenty-four-hour-service that is expected of him by his people. And if he has the proper priestly spirit, he will not allow any human attachment to interfere with that service. A part-time priest, "partly" dedicated to the service of his people and "partly" to any other human bond does not coincide with the image of the true "man of God" as pictured by St. Paul in his own life.

On the other hand, marriage is an exacting state of life. To describe its fundamental nature, our Lord quoted from Genesis: "This is why a man must leave father and mother and cling to his wife and the two become as one body. They are no longer two, therefore, but one body." St. Paul put it this way: "The wife has no rights over her own body; it is the husband who has them. In the same way, the husband has no rights over his body; the wife has them."

The duty imposed by the very nature of marriage on the couple of mutual love, care and comfort and of rearing and educating the

children claims most of their time. This is an all-absorbing task in the same way that the Catholic priesthood also in an all-absorbing task. The sociological changes of our times have not altered this essential quality of these two states of life. And if you crowd these two all-absorbing tasks into the limitations of one and the same person, one of them is bound to suffer by neglect. This remark of St. Paul will always be true as long as marriage entails deep love between husband and wife. An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord's affairs, all he needs worry about is pleasing the Lord; but a married man has to bother about the world's affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife: he is torn in two ways."

It will not do to cite the example of the married ministers of other Christian churches. It is true that they are efficient as ministers and at the same time good husbands and fathers. But we have to bear in mind that they have a very different kind of ministerial work from that of the Catholic priest. Aside from preaching the Gospel, and as a the Catholic priest has also to administer the sacraments and other means of grace. And when it comes to this ministry, the people of the parish do not always follow any schedule. Sick calls, for example, are never limited to "working hours". Frequently enough, they also come during "sleeping hours", in all kind of weather and in quite a few cases to far-off places where there are no roads. "Danger from rivers, in danger in the country, danger at sea; worked and labored, often without sleep," said St. Paul. And when he added: "I have been hungry and thirsty," this is not altogether a strange language to many missionaries and parish priests.

It could happen that the priests of one place could say: "But we have plenty of time to rear a family. Our priesthood does not claim our whole day." If true, then they simply have to revise their daily schedule. There is so much to do in the Church that we shall lament the dearth of priests and religious. If a priest does not find himself fully occupied in his priestly ministry, this will never mean that there is nothing more to do to save men. Wherever he is, he does not have to go far to find work waiting for him in the Church—not just work to while away the time, but work which is essential to the mission of the Church.

It is true that in the Oriental Churches there are part-time married priests. And recently a theologian has invoked the example of the Orthodox Church when he advocated the system of part-time priests for the Latin Church. But another theologian remarks: "As a recent study of the religious situation in Greece has pointed out the system which Kung proposes for the Roman Catholic Church has not borne such fruit among the Greek Orthodox as to make one enthusiastic to have Rome adopt it." (*Worship*, vol. 43).

It is said that a priest is only human and subject to the natural urge of sex as any other human being. And marriage is the natural fulfilment of this urge. It is true that the celibate priest is subject to temptations and at the same time he is frail. St. Paul said: "We are only the earthenware that holds this treasure." But he immediately added: "to make it clear that such an overwhelming power can be as strong as iron and resist breakage if it has recourse to the One who put in it His treasure. The same Apostle assured the Philipians: "There is nothing I cannot master with the *help of the One* who gives me strength." That is what Karl Rahner said: "Thus this matter of celibacy is a theology on its knees and in prayer." The Church does not only say to her priests: "Be celibate. Be chaste." She also insists: "On your knees. And do not get up until you succeed in having Christ live in you every moment of your life." The truth is that, in the case of priests and religious, celibacy is next to impossible without deep and true spirituality. Christ said: "Deny yourself and take up your cross." But He did not stop there. He continued: "And follow me." The Lord's answer to His Apostle is to be applied to every priest, however frail he is: "My grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness." The II Vatican Council says: "Let them (priests) not neglect to follow the norms, especially the ascetical ones, which have been tested by the experience of the Church and which are by no means less necessary in to-day's world." In this connection, it might be encouraging also to reflect upon these words of the Apostle: "Not that I have become perfect yet: I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me. I can assure you my brothers, I am far from thinking that I have already won. All I can say is that I forget the past and I strain ahead for what is still to come; I

am racing for the finish, for the prize of which God calls is upwards to receive in Christ Jesus."

Bishop Sheen said once that the cross without Christ is only a pagan instrument of torture; Christ without the cross would not be the Christ; but the cross with Christ is the salvation of the world. The cross of celibacy without Christ would be a most cruel imposition. But in intimate union with Christ, whatever pain it involves becomes the most consoling contribution to Christ's work of saving mankind. There was no tone of bitterness and frustration in St. Paul when he announced to the Colossians: "It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church.

To praise celibacy is not to belittle the married state which is a holy institution. But it is the conviction of the teaching body of the Church, inspired by Sacred Scripture as we have tried to show above and taught by experience that celibacy is not only a genuine alternative in Christian life but is that alternative in which the priestly ideal will be more perfectly and more effectively attained. So convinced, the Latin Church chooses her priests among those who commit themselves to a life long celibacy.

Dear brothers in the priesthood, celibacy must not be weighed with the eyes of human prudence. The instruments by which God wins men to Himself are often such as the world would not employ. In this, celibacy is much like poverty, "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Celibacy is a surrender, too. It is in this surrender that its excellence lies; it is death to self to live to Christ.

We close this letter with this appeal to our people: Our priests have denied themselves the legitimate joys of family life so as to better serve you and dedicate themselves fully to your welfare. Will it be asking too much if We beg you to show them your sympathy, understanding, love and trust? Like ourselves, they are your servants and your slaves, for Christ asked them to be so. Harsh and cruel treat-

ment might impair their work and even force them to seek consolation in a "family of their own," for it is still a human heart that beats in their breast. But love and understanding will always light up their way, for "it is a narrow gate" that they have entered and "a hard road" that they tread.

Through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, may the Lord Almighty, who alone knows the joys and sorrows, the victories and defeats, the days of light and of darkness of His priests, bless them and keep them in His love.

Manila, July 10, 1969

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