

ARCHDIOCESE OF CEBU
P. O. Box 52
Cebu City, Philippines

PRIESTLY CELIBACY

To our Beloved Clergy of the
Ecclesiastical Province of Cebu

Grace and Peace from Christ Jesus:

Last December 24, 1969, the Holy Father said in a letter to Cardinal B. Alfrink and the Hierarchy of Holland: "Whether it is a question of doctrine or of discipline, We are certain, Venerable Brothers, that the best service you can render to your priests and to your faithful at the present time... will be to affirm serenely your total and unreserved accord with the universal Church on the points contested." One of these points he mentions is the question of the celibacy of priests.

Circumstances in our Ecclesiastical Province are of course not identical with those of other countries. But the exhortation of the Holy Father may be applicable to all countries: the best service we the Bishops can render to our priests and to our faithful at the present time is to reaffirm in no uncertain terms our support of the insistence of the Holy Father, among other things, of maintaining the discipline of the Latin Church concerning priestly celibacy.

Our own Hierarchy, in a joint Letter addressed last year to you, the reverend Clergy of our country, invited you to reflect upon the principal reason why the celibacy of priests cannot be abolished in the Latin Church: we priests have to continue our life of total and complete dedication to the service of our Lord and His people.

The Holy Father once more emphasized this reason in his letter to his Cardinal Secretary of State last January when he said: "Are we, who have been called to follow Jesus, incapable of accepting a law

which has been tried and proved by such a long experience? Are we incapable of giving up all, family and nets, to follow Him and bring the Good News of the Savior? (cf. Mk. 1) Who could better transmit, with fullness of grace and force (cf. Acts 6, 8) this liberating message to the people of our times than the pastors who consecrate themselves without reservation and irrevocably to the exclusive service of the Gospel?"

Beloved priests, Holy Week is approaching and with it the commemoration on Holy Thursday of the Last Supper wherein our Lord conferred upon his Apostles the power to consecrate and offer His Body and Blood, the chief function of our cultic priesthood. This is why Holy Thursday is a special day for priests. It is the Priests' Day. It is the day when Christ associated us in a special manner with His eternal priesthood. For it is the day when those most solemn words were uttered: "Do this (do what I have just done) in memory of me."

For this reason We invite you all, dear priests, to set aside this coming Holy Thursday as a more thorough meditation on the meaning of our priesthood. We know that when the Bishop imposed his hands upon us during our ordination ceremonies, he was conferring on us not the "holy and royal priesthood" that St. Peter mentions in his First Epistle, for we already received that in our baptism, but the consecratory priesthood of his Church. We also know that this priesthood and celibacy are not inseparable in themselves, but what better witness can we, his consecratory priests, give to what Jesus calls "the one thing necessary than the renunciation even of the most legitimate of human pleasures and fulfillment, the love of one's own wife and children, for the sake of His service?"

To us, the priests of this Ecclesiastical Province, our pastoral work during the Holy Week cannot fail to remind us of our total dedication to our mission in the Church. The very long hours spent at the confession box, the thousands and thousands of communions we have to distribute, the preparation of our homilies, the processions we have to preside, the liturgical ceremonies at which we have to officiate specially during the Holy Triduum, cannot but make us aware of the fact that for us the whole year is only an extension of Holy Week for it is the Paschal Mystery that has to dominate every moment of our life as we

go through the days from the first day of Advent to the last week after Pentecost. We then realize that in this kind of life there is no place for another exacting office, like that of a husband and father of a family.

We remain celibate because we want to honor our commitment to the special service of God demanded from us by the Church and freely accepted by our own will, at an age when the Church had reasons to presume that we knew what we were doing. We remain celibate because we deny the assertion that no commitment can last the whole lifetime of a man, for we know the life testimony of innumerable priests in the history of the Church who remained faithful to the honor of their celibacy. We remain celibate, not because we have a low regard for the Sacrament of matrimony for we know it to be a holy institution of God, but because, like Jesus, we want to be free from any bond—however legitimate, in order to be bound only to Him who begged us to bring his Gospel to every man on earth, an all-absorbing task that would not admit of any sharing with another equally all-absorbing responsibility. We remain celibate because, like Paul VI, we believe "that the link between the priesthood and celibacy, as established for centuries by the Latin Church, constitutes for the Church a supremely precious and irreplaceable good" and we love the Church so much that we do not want to deprive her of this benefit and joy.

Allow Us to reiterate our plea, dearly beloved priests. Renew the consecration of yourself to your priesthood on Holy Thursday. As you make your holy hour before Jesus Christ present in the Repository that day, let everyone pledge once more his fidelity to the promises of his ordination. With a full realization of its implications let everyone pronounce once again the formula of his entrance into clerical life: "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup." Let everyone ponder deeply upon the fact that when he made freely the gift of himself to God and His people the day he was ordained, that act of supreme generosity must remain irreversible because the gift was accepted by God and we must never commit the disloyalty of reaching out to retrieve it from His hands in order to give a part of it to the service of wife and children. Let everyone realize that if our people love and respect us, it is because they know that we have no interests other than

the interests of Christ our Savior, that we have no preoccupations other than their welfare and their salvations, that we never work for a better social standing of our family for we have none of our own, but solely to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel.

Let us make this coming Holy Thursday really our Day, the Priests' Day.

Cebu City, March 13, 1970.

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