

ON PRIESTLY CELIBACY

*Letter of Pope Paul VI to the
Cardinal Secretary of State.*

The declarations about ecclesiastical celibacy which were published in Holland recently have profoundly saddened Us and raised many questions in Our mind: because of the reasons for such a grave stand, which is contrary to the sacrosanct norm in force in our Latin Church, because of the repercussions upon the whole People of God, especially on the clergy and young men preparing for the priesthood, because of the disturbing consequences in life of the entire Church, and the echoes which it is arousing among all Christians, also among other members of the human family.

In view of these queries, We feel the need to open Our mind to you, Lord Cardinal, who so closely share the cares of Our Apostolic Office.

First of all We ask Ourselves with humble and absolute interior sincerity whether there was any responsibility on Our part in regard to those unfortunate resolutions, which are so out of keeping with Our attitude and, We believe, with that of the whole Church.

The Lord is Our witness of the feelings of esteem, affection and trust which We have always had for Holland which is such a well-deserving part of Christ's Mystical Body. You, Lord Cardinal, well know how deferential and friendly We were in Our personal conversation and letters and in the action taken by the Organs of this Apostolic See to ward off the declarations in question.

Those declarations gave rise to much uncertainty and confusion. Consequently, it is a grave and compelling duty for Us to state Our attitude with all clarity: the attitude of him to whom a mysterious design of divine providence has in this difficult hour entrusted the care of all the Churches (cf. 2 Cor. 11, 28).

The reasons adopted to justify such a radical change in the centuries-old norm of the Latin Church, which has been means of so many fruits of grace, holiness and missionary apostolate, are well known. But We must say without equivocation that they do not appear convincing to Us. They seem to overlook a fundamental and essential consideration which must never be forgotten and which belongs to the supernatural order. That is to say, they represent a breakdown of the genuine concept of the priesthood.

The only perspective to be kept in mind is that of the mission of the Gospel, of which we are the heralds and witnesses, with faith and in hope of the Kingdom. The Bishop and the priest have the mission of announcing the Gospel of grace and truth (cf. Jn. 1, 14), to bring the message of salvation to the world, to make it aware of its sin and at the same time of its redemption, to call it to hope, to win it away from idols which are always reappearing, and convert to Christ the Saviour. The evangelical values cannot be understood and lived except in faith, in prayer, in penance, in charity, not without struggle and mortification, not without arousing at times the scorn, incomprehension and even persecution of the world, as in the case of Christ and the Apostles.

It is the ever deeper understanding of these considerations which has led the Latin Church to make renunciation of the right to found a family a condition for admission to the priesthood. That understanding has been matured in a providential way during the course of history which has known many efforts and many struggles to affirm the Christian ideal; and that renunciation has been spontaneously made by many servants of the Gospel. The considerations mentioned are still valid, perhaps more today than at any time. Are we, who have been called to follow Jesus, incapable of accepting a law which has been tried and proved by such long experience, and of abandoning all, family, nets, to follow Him and bring the Good News of the Saviour (cf. Mk. 1). Considering everything before God, before Christ and the Church, and before the World, We therefore feel it is Our duty clearly to reaffirm what We have already declared and several times repeated: that the link between priesthood and celibacy, as established for centuries by the Latin Church, constitutes for it a supremely precious

and irreplaceable good. It would be extremely rash to undervalue it or even to let it fall into disuse. It has been consecrated by tradition and is an incomparable sign of total dedication to the love of Christ (cf. Mt. 12, 29). It is a bright demonstration of the missionary demand which is essential in every priestly life, in service of the risen Christ, who lives for ever and to whom the priest has consecrated himself in total readiness for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

There are priests who, for reasons recognized as valid, have unfortunately found themselves radically unable to persevere. We know they are only a small number, whereas the great majority wishes, with the help of grace, to remain faithful to the sacred pledges made before God and the Church. It is with great sorrow that We agree to accept their insistent requests to be released from their promises and dispensed from their obligations. We do this only after careful examination of every single case. However, the profound understanding which We have for persons, in a spirit of paternal charity, must not hinder Us from deploring an attitude which is so little in accord with what the Church rightfully expects from those who have definitely consecrated themselves to its exclusive service.

The Church will therefore continue in the future as in the past to entrust the divine ministry of the word, of the faith and of the sacraments of grace only to priests who remain faithful to their obligations.

The same many-sided contestation today against such a holy institution as sacred celibacy, makes more imperious than ever Our duty to sustain and encourage in every way the innumerable ranks of priests who have remained loyal to their pledge. Our thoughts and blessing go out to them with most special affection.

For this reason, after mature examination of the matter, We clearly affirm it Our duty not to permit the priestly ministry to be exercised by those who have turned back after having put their hand to the plough (cf. Lk. 9, 62).

In any case, is not this the constant tradition of the venerable Oriental Churches, to which reference is so often made in this regard?

At all events, We hardly dare to think of the incalculable consequences which a different decision would entail for the People of God on the spiritual and pastoral planes.

While We feel it Our duty to reaffirm the norm of sacred celibacy in this way with so much clarity, We are not forgetting a question which has been insistently raised with Us by some Bishops, whose zeal, attachment to the venerable tradition of the priesthood in the Latin Church and the very eminent values which it expresses, are known to Us. We also know their pastoral anxieties in view of certain quite special needs of their apostolic ministry. They ask Us whether it might not be possible to consider ordaining to the priesthood men of advanced age who have given proof of exemplary family and professional life in their social circumstances, in a situation of extreme shortage of priests, and limited to regions in such a situation.

We cannot conceal that such an eventuality arouses grave reservations on Our part. Would it not be, amongst other things, a very dangerous illusion to believe that such a change in traditional discipline could be restricted in practice to local cases of true and extreme necessity? And would it not also be a temptation to others to look to it for an apparently easier answer to the present lack of sufficient vocations?

In any case, the consequences would be so grave and would pose such new questions for the Church's life, that they would, if considered, need to be given attentive previous examination, by Our Brothers in the Episcopate in union with Us. Account would have to be taken before God of the good of the universal Church, which could not be separated from that of the local Churches.

These problems which come under Our pastoral responsibility are truly grave, and, Lord Cardinal, We have wished to confide them to you.

You together with Us are witness of the appeals which come to Us from all sides. Many of Our Brothers and Children implore Us not to make any change in such a venerable tradition. They, together with Us hope that Our Venerable Brothers, the Bishops of Holland, will reflect further about the matter with the Apostolic See, through trusting and fraternal contacts. Such further reflection will need to

be matured in prayer and charity. We for Our part desire more than ever to seek together with the Pastors of the dioceses of the Netherlands for means of solving their problems in a suitable way, in common consideration for the good of the whole Church. We therefore believe it to be above all necessary to assure the Bishops, the priests and all the members of the Dutch Catholic Community of Our constant affection, but at the same time to assure them that it is Our conviction that it is indispensable to reconsider the desire expressed and the stand taken in a question of such grave importance and scope for the universal Church. These ought to be reconsidered in the light of the reflections stated above and in a spirit of authentic ecclesial communion.

We count particularly, Lord Cardinal, on your valuable collaboration in the work which the Holy See will have to do in this connection.

Your aid will also be valuable for the contacts which will have to be made with the Bishops of the entire world, in order that all Episcopal Conferences, maintaining perfect communion with Us and the universal Church in absolute respect for its laws, may assure their priests, Our fellow workers, that We are following and will continue to follow with Our paternal affection their anxieties in the apostolate and their problems; that the Episcopal Conferences may remind them at the same time of the beauty of the grace which the Lord has granted them, also of their sacred pledges and the missionary demand of their ministry. In these circumstances Our thoughts cannot but go out most cordially to those young men who are preparing themselves with the generosity of their apostolic drive to serve Christ and their fellows in the priesthood with all their hearts. They are really the Church's hope for the evangelization of the world: always provided that they commit themselves irrevocably and without reserve to the form of life which the Church puts before them.

Finally, Lord Cardinal, it will be necessary to make insistent calls to the multitude of faithful souls, who are still silent but do not therefore suffer less in this time of trial, and ask them for generous prayers.

May the Lord grant all, Pastors and faithful, the power of hope and the ardour of charity: "may grace be with all those who love Our Lord Jesus Christ with unchanging love" (Eph. 6, 24).