

A LETTER TO A YOUNG PRIEST ON

PRIESTLY CELIBACY

Dear Juaning,

Your letter came to me as a surprise! It has been a long time since I heard from you. While this was my reaction to your writing, the content of the same was not really unexpected: the problem of priestly celibacy is really upon us. Being a young priest as you are, it is not really surprising that this problem would affect you more intimately, more profoundly.

The great bulk of articles, books, etc. being published nowadays against the centuries-old tradition of the Latin Church about priestly celibacy reminds me of an anecdote. It is said that many years ago, one of the statues which decorate the facade and the colonnade of Saint Peter's fell. The press spread the news with great excitement, but no one took notice of the other numerous statues which remained standing to decorate such a sublime work of art. On that occasion, Cardinal Maffi, speaking of the unfortunate fall of some priest, about whom the press created much scandal, invited all to admire the marvelous masterpieces which enriched the mystical edifice of the Church through the celibacy which had been lived by so many priests.

This, I believe, is the complete, down-to-earth picture of the current priestly celibacy question. The press always hungry for the sensational, pick on some, isolated rotten cases, completely neglecting to invite our attention to the consideration of the innumerable phalanx of dedicated, chaste priests and religious. But what can we really do about this? They have to think in terms of graphic rise of subscription.

Do not think that I intended to end up this letter with this remark. It will not be fair to write too short an answer to a long letter of yours. I have noticed that your letter was written with anguish, doubts, confusion and anxiety.

What I intend to do here is to answer the most current reasons against priestly celibacy. But before I proceed answering them, I believe it is expedient to lay down some basic principles regarding priestly celibacy. So brace yourself up; this will be a long letter.

Basic Principles

1. *Celibacy, while it is not required by the nature of the priesthood itself, has, for many reasons, an intimately fitting relation to it.*

It is true that priesthood and celibacy are not essentially linked, by their own inner nature. This is obvious enough in the law in force in the Oriental Church. But the great mysteries, forces, joys and values which take on significance and are fulfilled in it, and which were revealed by Christ, discovered by the apostles and all those who like them, attracted by the inspiring heroism of Christ, gave up everything to follow Him, brought it about that celibacy, offered by the Master as a charism of the Father for those who understand the mystery, was gradually recommended to priest, then practised by many priests, in the course of the centuries, as a tribute to Christ's virginal flesh, and finally imposed by law in the Latin Church upon all those promoted to the Sacred Orders.

Accordingly it is a wrong approach to view priestly celibacy as a purely juridical of the Church. Nor would it be a valid method to measure it in purely human dimension. Priestly celibacy is a mystery that participates in the mystery of Christ and of His Priesthood; it is in close harmony with priesthood.

2. *There are four fundamental reasons for the celibacy:*

a) *Celibacy is the symbol of the virgin Christ: the Lord, a virgin, born of a Virgin, surrounded himself with chaste men, who although married one day, when the time came to commit themselves to the Kingdom, left everything to live as the Lord lived. He preferred virginal freedom and consecration in his ministers. The priest's picture is definitively one of an undivided heart, body and spirit, free to devote himself entirely to the mission conferred on him, fascinated and almost obsessed by the beauty of this mission.*

b) Celibacy is an anticipated presence, a living and a personal sign of the future world, in which not only priest, but all the children of the Resurrection will not marry.

c) It is also a splendid testimony of a love that does not abolish or kill human love, but transfers it, making it divine to the adorable Person of Christ, and, in him, to all men, especially the most indigent, enriching the capacity and universality of our love.

d) Celibacy is again a testimony of the ineffable joy that the Lord offers those whom He has chosen as close friends and to whom He has entrusted the mystery of the transmission of His divine life and of the salvation of men. This creative joy is concentrated in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, when the priest enacts the Paschal Mystery of the Lord, making present His Body and His Blood, offered as a victim of thanksgiving and given as food and drink of eternity.

3. For these reasons the legislation of celibacy for those who are destined to the priesthood in the Latin Church is approved and confirmed once again.

4. The Church guards celibacy as priceless treasure and a charism or gift of the Lord conferred for the whole people and for the common good. It is accepted in the Church to be higher than the married state.

5. The way of celibacy is a difficult one. The Lord did not tell us that the path of celibacy would be an easy one. On the contrary, since we are caught up in the Paschal Mystery, our priestly spirituality conforms us to Christ crucified. There remains in our flesh, wounded by sin, the pernicious tendency recalled by St. Paul, the rebellion of the flesh. However, although granting this difficulty, it is certainly not impossible with grace. For this reason it calls for a propitious atmosphere on the part of the priest.

You will excuse me for being carried away; it is just that talking about celibacy in its profound theological context, one cannot help but be romantic.

But inspite of all these, there are people bent on tearing down the theology of celibacy. You yourself mentioned some of them in your letter.

For instance — this is their favorite reason — it is said that any renunciation of marriage implies some sort of *physical or psychical* abnormality in the person. The *Rev. Marc Oraison*, a psychoanalyst of the Freudian school and later a priest, gives lie to this assertion in his book *Le celibat*, Paris, 1966. He says that the renunciation of matrimony, just as entering into it, is a genuine possibility which nature rightly understood offers. Human sexuality is not something fixed; it is a task, which admits, at least for a Christian and a priest, a possible answer of renunciation for the sake of something more grandiose and sublime. The act of renouncing implies a decision, and this last is undoubtedly an exercise of human liberty, the rock-bottom of human personality.

Some have argued that marriage and family commitments would provide the priest with an *easier way of knowing the world*. Partly this might be true. Many of us have little or no knowledge of the concrete realities of family life. Most of our seminary days were spent in a closed environment, far from the realities of the everyday world.

Long experience however, has shown that consecrated celibates can understand the family very well and serve it effectively. To transcribe verbatim the words of *Folliet* — “to how many men have I, a poor celibate had to explain the psychology of women in general and of their wives in particular? How many parents have I had to help understand their children, because they felt they could do nothing with them?” I doubt very much whether married priests would better understand the family and families by the mere fact that they are married. Remember that their experience would have to be necessarily limited.

Most of these people who favor the abolition of celibacy tend to paint marriage life with rainbow colors, some sort of an unending heavenly bliss. If I were to meet this kind of people I would tell them to look at the reality of the family straight in the eye. That reality is more often grey than rosy.

There is the problem of bearing the yoke together in unity, of fidelity. What assurance do we have from a fully mature man who fails to keep his vow of celibacy to be constant in keeping his marriage vow?

Then there is the problem of poverty. We priests tend to overlook this angle, being cared for too well from the very day we entered the seminary up to this very moment. Now we have only to feed ourselves — and how hard it is to indulge in some of our little vices!

The grinding poverty of a married priest's family will tempt him to accept a "better" charge, even though, measured by the standard of service, his present parish could be the better one. And who can blame him? What would follow from this is the disastrous effect in the ministry of the Church.

Closely related to this problem will be the difficulty of staffing the outposts of the church. There is certainly a limit to the sacrifice that can reasonably be asked of a wife and children. A Protestant minister wrote how the Christian nobility of their ladies has often been pushed to the breaking point, and sometimes beyond it, by the conditions under which they and their young children have had to live. Does the Church have the right to ask this of a family man? But if almost all priests are family men, as they are in most Protestant denominations, whom else is the Church to send?

In relation to the priest's ministry, there is a great probability that his family would be an obstacle to the full exercise of his ministry. The burdens and anxieties of ministering to the people of God are, God knows, heavy enough, and a married priest who takes them seriously will frequently find that "his interests are divided": either he neglects his family for the sake of the ministry or vice versa, and both solutions are bad.

And supposing the priest has a *jealous wife*? What troubles await him after having a long spiritual direction with a pretty young thing! You can expect also that the parishioners, especially the fairer sex will be inhibited in their candor by the mere fact their parish priest has a jealous wife. And what will happen to the sacrosanct *seal of confession*? It is not impossible to keep it sacrosanct really, but it will be difficult to protect it against such a woman.

And the parish priest's children? You can't always be sure that in spite of what you are, your children might come out, for hundreds of reasons, juvenile delinquents. How can you preach from the pulpit,

castigating the parents for their negligence in the parental duties? You won't dare. But what about your sacred duties to call their attention? I wish they can tell me how.

Now, do not be in a hurry. I know that you mentioned of another theory, the so-called *two-tier clergy*, namely, a married clergy side by side with celibate. This is actually a more concrete proposition flowing from the so-called *optional celibacy*. The Oriental churches have institutionalized this duality by having a married secular clergy and a regular clergy which is celibate and from which bishops are chosen. This might not be a very bad idea. Now I'll have a chance to be a bishop! But joking aside, I believe that this will only serve to render the secular clergy's ministry ineffective. The diocesan clergy would very likely suffer by slowly losing its prestige among the faithful. They will be comparing you with us religious, and they will most naturally choose us. The mere fact that we do not have any family, they will see that we are more at their disposition than you are. We would appear purer, more austere. Would you want that?

Supposing you say that the optional celibacy is admitted, still I see analogous problems. In the first place, you must take into consideration that in this scheme, there will necessarily be division among the diocesan clergy. Then how will you avoid rivalries among yourselves and among the faithful? Among yourselves: the married priests will naturally have to be provided with better parishes because they have more mouths to feed. The celibates will naturally complain. Some faithful will prefer the celibates, others will go to the married priests. Comparisons will be inevitable. I do not have to tell you who will normally come out the winner.

Lots of things can still be included here, but let us close up here. Only one last thing more. The case for or against clerical celibacy should not be based ultimately on any *prudential consideration* but on the *ascetical dimension*. In a culture which seems to have made sex into a sacrament, a Church in which matrimony is a sacrament must at the same time give institutional expression to the biblical truth that "he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do better" (I Cor. 7:38). This must remain part of our

Christian understanding of life, despite the painful defects which we see in those who one day vowed to follow this truth.

I do not know whether I had been of some help to you in this question. Let us pray to God that we who had accepted freely the tremendous dignity of priesthood would not fail to follow from the fact of dissociating from it what we freely agreed to unite with it, namely, the total offering of ourselves to Christ "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:12).

Fraternally yours,

Fr. Leonardo Z. Legaspi O.P.

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