

Married Priests : A Few Reflections

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(English translation by Rebel Girl)

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Speaking of married Catholic priests is not an issue for the future, something that could one day be allowed in the Catholic Church. Or a marginal issue -- the Eastern Rite priests or those who have come from Anglicanism. It is a reality that already exists, one with which there is vast experience already present in every diocese in the world and in statistically significant numbers -- that of the priests who have left their priestly ministry because of having chosen married life. Sociological studies are beginning to appear on this subject, which gather not only statistics but, above all, vivid stories of those lives [1] .

Based on these accounts, on knowledge of many other lives and on my own experience -- I was an active Catholic priest for 34 years and have been married and a family man for another 20 years -- I would like to offer some reflections on the life of a married priest:

There is the clandestine married priest. He doesn't leave his ministry although he lives a full married life, sometimes even with children and some sort of civil recognition of the marriage contract. And although this situation is known, often the bishop's permissiveness and the community's understanding allow him to continue in ministry, while the cohabitation is disguised as some other supposed family tie. It seems that this kind of married priest is increasing, avoiding the departure of many priests needed for the care of communities. Married life and fatherhood often makes the priest a more understanding and centered person in his ministry. However, I believe that true love demands making it public, to the leaders and members of the Christian community before anyone else. Having to hide it is a cruel violence. And it is especially unfair to the spouse who, even though freely, gives everything to her loved one without being recognized and taken into account in his priestly work or social life.

There is the married priest who, despite having made his family life public, has not requested a reduction to lay status or resigned from continuing his ministry. It is usually because the Christian community he serves, even if it's an official parish, defends him against the bishop's attempt to send a substitute. The parishioners have full confidence in him, as his married status is fully accepted and positively valued by most of them. In these cases, the love is not secret and the presence of the woman is recognized, but there is an unhealthy tension between maintaining the institutional character of his ministry and expressly contradicting a legal norm of that institution. It is possible, as in the previous case of clandestine married priests, to justify this violation of a canonical rule on the basis of fidelity to the Christian community to whose service he feels devoted. But it means continually rethinking why he is acting officially as a minister of an institution whose norms are manifestly instilled. And I don't feel this is psychologically or spiritually healthy. I would add for *Atrio* that this option of not giving up ministry, even after the engagement to the partner is public, should perhaps be valued more strategically. Sometimes it happens with impressive serenity and consistency, as in the case of Julio Perez Pinillos in Spain.



The situation on which I would like to reflect further is, however, the priest who at some point in his life has been fully open to conjugal love and parenthood, making it public in his church and in society, with all the consequences. This involves a formal application for or the de facto practice of laicization, with the loss of any position in the church that is linked to priestly ministry. Usually it also involves the loss of teaching jobs in church schools and even in civilian centers if he was a professor of religion. This priest doesn't regard remaining in the Church as a layperson as punishment. For him, it is rather a choice and liberation, despite the many sacrifices it entails. This is the type of married priest I will be referring to in the following reflections:

1. The choice of lay status made by a Catholic priest should be a fully free and well thought out act. For a person who has been marked by ministry for many years (ten, twenty, and even thirty or forty) it isn't a trivial matter, nor can such a decision be made under pressure of events or other people, in a state of depression or at a "time of turmoil." The person should have sufficient background knowledge and emotional intelligence to analyze the complexity of that change at a given moment of his life. He should consider his own good (including his feelings and inner stirrings) and also the spiritual good of those who depend on him. Discerning the best path to follow should be done alone. In any case, he can follow the classic rules for discerning of spirits, such as those St. Ignatius puts forward in the *Exercises*. But I don't recommend raising it with the bishop and fellow priests or others until the personal decision has been made. It's also important to be fully honest with oneself. And if the idea of changing status has emerged from the encounter with a woman, opening a new life project, one should take this factor into account and not try to put the emphasis on other motives. Falling in love is not a weakness but a moment of light and creativity. And the woman is not there to be a temptress, but a life partner.
2. Communicating the decision to one's superior, peers, close friends and the community is usually done naturally and with the utmost openness. Fortunately the days are gone when these difficult situations would lead to social stigma, being characterized -- which is sometimes internalized -- as a traitor and usually a secret flight to a distant place. It is appropriate at this early stage not to let negative judgments come to harm one's conscience and self-esteem. Nor let praise or the mere curiosity of others make such a priest a hero or a visionary. I think at that time of rupture, with all the energy that a vital decision of this kind provides, it's appropriate to retreat a bit from the public and build the foundation for the future life -- the family and civilian work above all.
3. It is important that ties with the church community be kept in the new life so as not to feel completely displaced from it. In my experience, many colleagues have found a new dimension of being a Christian and a member of the church community from this new perspective -- participating in the Eucharist, but as one among others without presiding, taking some responsibility for catechesis or social assistance, continuing with a base community or with a theological working group ... Leaving the ministerial priesthood, new experiences of being a Christian and the common priesthood are discovered.
4. What those who have gone through this experience most tend to agree upon is that they have matured as adults, knowing what it is to work like anyone else to feed a family, being responsible for very specific beings with very specific needs. Life becomes more real. The married priest realizes that his clerical life took place in an unreal setting of privileges. Theoretically, he was deprived of a family to better serve others, but in practice he was a capricious bachelor. It seemed that he was once a busy person, but he has now learned that one can do much more than he did. Many called him father, but he was nobody's real father.



5. The married priest fundamentally changes the understanding of what women and sexuality are. There may be priests who live out their celibacy with full integrity and peace. Very often, the married priest recalls that the occasional or professional relationship with a woman represented an awakening of sexual attraction, a temptation that required control and made normal treatment difficult. But now, his life being centered on a woman, he treats other women with ease as colleagues or friends. Moreover, the married priest suddenly notices that a certain undefined and unacknowledged attraction his persona used to have for women, especially celibate ones but also unsatisfied married ones or those with maternal instincts, suddenly disappears. He stops being the hidden desire of many women because it is public knowledge that his life belongs to a particular one. With a few exceptions I take for granted, although I have known very few, celibacy is usually a mechanism for sexual obsessions, both active and passive. Each one deals with them through dreams, playing, substitution, sublimation or repression, as he can. It's all very human and understandable, as long as it's not an abuse of power, which often occurs and not only with children. But the married priest learns for the first time what is really normal between a man and woman and realizes with regret how much time and spiritual energy he has had to use for so many years to face the unresolved issue of sex and women.

6. Even with difficulties -- because since adolescence and youth he wasn't prepared for a healthy couple relationship but the exact opposite -- the married priest usually arrives at the essence of conjugal love, total mutual gift of life, in body and soul. Experiencing the realism of this boundless love, in which the most corporal and the most spiritual vibrate in unison, is a unique experience for personal fulfillment. The Christian spirituality that we have experienced made flesh the enemy of the spirit and sexual inclinations, a disordered passion. Paul and, above all, Augustine have much to do with it. And there has been much talk about love, without taking into account that the *analogatum princeps* of love has been and will always be specific marital love, in which *eros* and *agape* unite. From this basic experience, the person is naturally open to love and respect for other people. Speaking of this, a famous theologian used to tell me: "I understand your way, but I realize that I have not been called to the love of proximity." Unwittingly, a lucid but extremely anti-gospel expression had come out of him. [2]

7. But if the married priest has received the gift of being a father, this experience changes the deeper structures of his personality even more than conjugal love. If marital love is experienced as a novelty by the priest, the experience of actually being a father was generally not expected by him prior to his change in status. If this experience is transformational for the lives of even the youngest, it is much more so for the one who comes to it with the maturity of years and experience. That long ongoing process, hour by hour, day by day, in the closeness and complete self-giving to the child that makes you a father from the moment of conception, is the big surprise for most married priests. That which is most yours is least yours. The begotten son is totally dependent on the parents, but he isn't *for* the parents. When you are a father, you understand God, you feel that you are a creator like God and at the same time the recipient of an unexpected gift that in and of itself gives meaning to your entire life. Responsibility arises, with no need for any other basis, from the experience of paternity. It's absurd that an organization like the Church universally deprives its cadres of this experience as a matter of principle. Any attempt to assume that same sense of responsibility with respect to spiritual children cannot substitute for the primary experience of actual paternity. Any married priest who has lived the dual experience of pastoral and paternal responsibility can attest to this.



8. Finally, the spirituality of a married priest tends to be deeper and more realistic. It is possible that some, in the traumatic moment of rupture, may have preferred to leave faith or spiritual work in a corner. Many others, from the outset or later, have continued the search for the God of Jesus in their new lives. In that case, the married priest experiences his faith being purified and made stronger. He will reject beliefs and practices that he no longer believes in. But the deep sense of adoration of the mystery that is at the depths of his real life and that of all people, will be bonded in him.

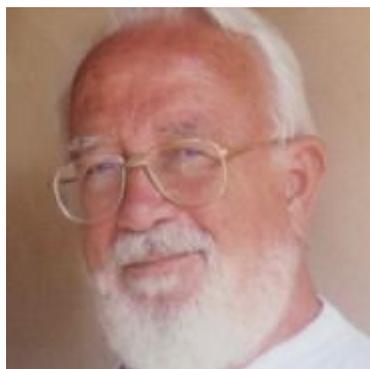
The married priest who has gone through the process described here, absolutely aspires to return again to priestly ministry, as it is conceived in the Church today. But he doesn't stop feeling responsible for the future fate of his original community of faith. So he suffers when he sees those responsible for the latter --bishops and hierarchs who were often his companions or disciples -- living so far from reality, awaiting the return of a premodern world and leading the Church into a ghetto. They dare not take the steps that are now necessary to make the church a real hotbed of believing followers of Jesus in the 21st century. The married priest would be willing to make available his experience and journey, which could surely be very useful to them.

[1] In Spain, Núñez i Mosteo, Francesc. *Les plegades. Capellans secularitzats. La identitat dels Ex.* PhD thesis presented at the School of Sociology, University of Barcelona in 2005. The full text (in Catalan, with abstract in English) at <http://www.tdx.cat/TDX-0721106-124528> (accessed 09/23/10). AA. VV.: *¿Por qué nos salimos los secularizados?* Carena Editors, Valencia 2009, (<http://www.carenaeditors.com/>). Fifteen laicized priests (including the author of this article) relate their experience. Also Moceop-España (<http://www.moceop.net/>) is about to publish a book of 23 similar stories.

[2] On this and other points I have in mind both the analysis of E. Drewerman (*Clérigos. Psicograma de un ideal*, Trotta, Madrid 1995) on clerical life and Marcel Légaut (*El hombre en busca de su Humanidad*, AML-<http://www.marcellegaut.org/>, Madrid 2001) on the foundational experiences of the human person.

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