

“Celibacy”

(Priesthood, the Eucharist and the People of God.)

1. *What is “celibacy”?* The term is in inverted commas because celibacy does not exist. What exists are celibate people: in the context of church discussions, people (priests and professional religious) who have renounced marriage and children, the joy of spending a life of physical and spiritual union with another human being, in order to live a life of total commitment to God and their neighbour. They are indeed “jewels in the crown of the church”, but not the only jewels, as this is only one form of commitment. This particular form is a special gift or charism with a long tradition stretching back to early monastic or eremitical forms of ascetic life style.

2. *What has “celibacy” become?* In the discipline of the Roman Catholic Church it has for some become just that, a discipline, part of a package that must be accepted if one wishes to follow the call to priesthood in the people of God. From the early Christian communities, where it was the norm for the “priest” to be married, and indeed where “priest” connoted a state of life very different from its modern equivalent, we have to follow an extended historical trajectory, through the integration of the church into the public life of the post Constantinian Roman Empire, and on into the late Middle Ages, when finally priesthood and celibacy were inextricably linked by law. Many complex factors may have contributed to this development: an increased focus on ‘holy things’ in the sacramental field, a consequent return to Jewish notions of ritual purity and impurity, conflicting philosophical stances (some of which denigrated the physical and material and hence the human body and its sexual aspects), questions over inheritance and church property in a feudal type society. This development was perhaps natural and inevitable in a hierarchical church model which mirrored the feudal and hierarchical structures of society.

3. *What of “celibacy” now?* Many of us live in societies which are, at least in theory, democratic and where all citizens are co responsible, through elected delegates, in decision making and policy forming. Another church model calls for attention based on Mathew’s dictum “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them” (Mat. 18:20). This is no longer a model of power where a group of male, celibate “priests” govern and rule, where all movement (of command and grace) is downwards and where there is a very clear dividing line between clergy and laity. We are reminded that we are all ‘laos’ (laity) in the root sense of co members of the people of God. That model particularly calls for attention when we look around our present day church communities:
 - Official church documents place the celebration of the Eucharist at the heart and centre of our Christian community life. For how long have so many of our communities been denied that beating heart at the centre of their lives because of a lack of traditionally chosen, male,

celibate priest presiders? Para liturgies where a “priest” cannot be present are hardly a sufficient response.

- The harsh reality of sexual, and particularly paedophile, scandals have deeply disturbed our communities. It would perhaps be naïve to posit a direct causal connection between such sexual abuses and a celibate life style, but the arrested emotional and sexual development brought about by the traditional, isolated, male preparation for that life style no doubt has played a part.
- We are faced by the deep rooted change in sexual mores in our society, the fact of rising divorce rates and the increasing phenomenon of cohabitation. “Celibacy” has its own symbolic value, but alongside that we require a theology of sexuality and marriage and the equal esteem of both the celibate and the married.

4. *What of “celibacy” in the future?* There will always be a place for the charism of the celibate life style. However, in the context of twenty first century communities, and granted the present crises, we have two choices. We can react like corporate managers or supermarket directors in the face of shortages and problems: We downsize and frantically close and amalgamate parishes, making the Eucharistic celebration more and more inaccessible. Would it not be better to have a closer look at our historical evolution and, instead of freezing the frame in the late Middle Ages, allow a different model of church to emerge? This would be to cultivate a vision for the future and perhaps apply in this context an expanded form of Paul’s dictum in Galatians: “There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female, *heterosexual and homosexual, cleric and lay*: for you are all one person in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

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