

WHO IS GUILTY OF À LA CARTE CHRISTIANITY?

Elizabeth Price

At almost the same time as I was asked to write this article, I bought three publications. Reading them I felt their arrival was almost providential, as they say the things I would like to say far better than I can say them! The first is **Caritas in Veritate**, where Benedict makes this profoundly perceptive remark: *One of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation* and goes on to explain *as a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations....The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures.* (para.53)

Why, oh why, can he not see that all over the world, thanks to the Church's own doing, some of the most lonely, isolated and unhappy men can be priests confined alone in presbyteries? Some of these priests, like those in Advent and other associations of priests who have left the priesthood to marry, (men whom I have met), appear through having lived their relationships to the full in marriage, to have personal identities that have indeed matured. Their dismissal from priestly service by the Church authorities is a scandalous waste of men who could be far better clergy for having married. I believe the number of these since Vatican II is 80,000 and rising. This does not include figures of seminarians leaving before ordination, or those attracted to the priesthood who eschew celibacy because they realize their need to live interpersonal relationships in full authenticity.

The second book I have is **Priests in Love – Roman Catholic clergy and their intimate relationships**. (Continuum 2006) This is written by Jane Anderson who for the research in this book received a Ph.D in anthropology in 2004. Mother of four teenage children, she lives in Yakamia, Western Australia, where she has been active in parish life for over 20 years. On the back of the book, Terry Dosh, a church historian who has been studying the celibacy/married-priest question since 1962, says 'What makes this book so powerful are the voices of real priests. It is peppered with lively, authenticating verbatims.' The Catholic Reporter says of it 'Jane Anderson has done the Catholic Church a great service with her book. She has won the confidence of a significant number of priests, especially priests in love. Their confidence allows them to speak to the church through her book in a way that has not been done before.' Perhaps what gives it most authenticity, I unkindly think, is the reaction she reports of 'some influential priests and lay persons who knew about my research... Their comments and behaviour sought to denigrate me and diminish the validity of the study *'She wants to be a priest; she must be having an affair with a priest; she's one of them; she's a feminist; she's a black tracker* (a term insinuating that she was 'chasing after priests') Several bishops also had a go at me for having *entered the realm of the confessional*, inferring that my research was sacrilegious. Another bishop charged my anthropological approach as being *blasphemous*, implying that truth cannot be communicated outside of official church scholarship. The litany of put-downs continues to the present day.'

This book is the story of priests who decided not to marry, but live in what amount to clandestine marriages in order to continue in their priesthood. Some are deeply fulfilled by this action, others are torn apart with guilt. Jane Anderson gives several pages of analysis of the Vatican's myopia about this damage. One example is: 'The pope and curia believe that for a priest, the shared loving of human beings competes with the loving of God. A priest must therefore prioritize his dedication and service to God alone. Confident in this presumption, they are able to assert that celibacy is possible for all priests. Moreover, they maintain, if the church prays for this gift of celibacy it will

never be denied to those who ask.’ Anderson tells the story of a German vocations director who, sitting next to John Paul II, dared to suggest an end to the mandatory celibacy rule. ‘John Paul II reacted immediately, threw his arms in the air and almost shouted ‘impossible, impossible’ – and then gave a strong defense of celibacy’ A few weeks after the conference, the priest was removed from his position because his archbishop had been pressured by Rome to get rid of him.

This is why people like Jane Anderson are so important. Having no official position in the Church (although they are the Church as God’s holy people) they can tell the truth without suffering loss of their livelihood, but merely receive slanderous and pettily spiteful words like those related above. Her book is a red-hot read for all those interested in the thinking behind, the damage done, and the necessity for the removal of mandatory celibacy. We can all see the damage being done to church communities by increasing parish closures as Rome hangs on to prayer for more vocations and ignoring the destruction they themselves are bringing about.

My last purchase is **A Pure Heart Create in Me – Theology of the Body Today** edited by Robert Colquhoun (Family Publications 2008). It is a series of essays by supporters of *Humanae Vitae*. This shows the depressing theology of sexuality still current in those supporting the ban on contraception. One of the most telling authors in this book is Fr. Tim Finigan of Black Fen, who, alas, teaches seminarians at Womersley, and is a fervent promoter of the Tridentine Mass. He says ‘In chapter 22 of *Catechism - A New Synthesis*, in which he dealt with ‘Sexual Control and Birth Control,’ Fr. Holloway began the chapter saying ‘It is a grief to have to speak of marriage and of married love as if the sexual act were the only thing, or the main thing in the life between men and women in whose lives the bond of marriage is deeply and sincerely spiritual’. (p114). Then on p123 he continues with his own view ‘The mistake in first principles is to admit that sex is a ‘way of loving’. The correct first principle is that sex is for children – within a particular state of loving which is marriage. This seems rather daunting at first sight. If the basic and first principle of sex is for having children within the state of loving which is marriage, then any use of sex at all outside of marriage will be wrong. And even within marriage, any use of sex which deliberately excludes children will also be wrong’.

Frs. Holloway and Finigan are orthodox followers of Pius XII. It was only in the middle of the last century that the first married theologian to write, Von Hildebrand, united intercourse to conjugal love. Pius XII subsequently poured scorn on the idea that ‘the sexual act itself has an emotional meaning for the couple’ (*Midwives* 43) and went on to defend this position by saying this is contrary to the ‘God-given’ primacy of procreation over all the other ends of marriage. The Dissenting Four theologians on the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control are also graphic purveyors of this nonsense saying: ‘Conjugal love, if the love is genuine is above all a spiritual matter and requires no carnal gestures, much less at repeated intervals, because if we look at the love between a father and a daughter or a brother and a sister, we find no need of carnal gestures’. These are the men whose advice Paul VI accepted, rather than the wisdom of the majority.

This is where we come to the point of this article. It was St. Paul who first condemned the earliest examples of *à la carte* teaching saying ‘I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you to the grace of Christ, and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed’ (Gal 1 6-8). Today Fr. Seán Fagan SM echoes St. Paul in a book he published last year called **What Happened to Sin?** (Columbia Press, Dublin). He dedicated it to ‘All the married people of God who have suffered through the ages from the flawed teaching of Augustine which usurped the teaching of Christ’. In this he unerringly points at both Gospel teaching, how it was usurped, by whom, and the dismal results of this departure, of which I believe mandatory celibacy and the distorted theology behind the ban on contraception are two!

The teaching of Christ Fr. Fagan that refers to is in Mt. 19: 4-6. This is a passage used with fundamentalist fervour by Church leaders to ban divorce, but it has never been seen as divine revelation about human sexuality. In my own words I believe Christ is saying that the sexual instinct in humans is to drive young people (and sometimes even those who at first accepted mandatory celibacy) to leave home and go out courting to find a spouse to whom they cleave for life. They have intercourse together, as a result of which 'they are no longer two but one flesh' and it is in this context that Jesus adds: 'What God has joined together, let no man put asunder'. The initial and continuous purpose of intercourse is to unite and sustain the couple as one. Procreation is its later occasional function. Magisterial teaching, so accurately voiced by Fr. Finigan, shows no understanding of this teaching whatsoever, except in an almost fundamentalist ban on divorce.

Way back in 400 AD. St. Augustine, a repentant fornicator, blasphemously misquoted this passage changing these beautiful words of Christ into 'In intercourse a man becomes ALL flesh' He mistook the interpersonal sexual magnetism which is part of the oneness of spouses, to be the pull of lust resultant upon the Fall. The initial and continuous purpose of intercourse in Christ's terms is to augment the oneness of the couple (the secure base upon which the family is later built). This is the reason why, rightly, couples have intercourse frequently. That frequency Augustine saw as lustful use of the physical pleasure put in the act for the good of the race. Rather than seeing union of the couple as man and wife as the primary purpose of marriage, with all the joyous love that goes with it, he claimed that the primary purpose of marriage was the procreation of children, and taught that all intercourse which was not procreative in intention or form was mortal or venial sin. There are myriads of other quotations from the Early Fathers betraying an extraordinary attitude to women and sexuality. Many notable theologians researching the theories of sexuality behind mandatory celibacy at its inception have quoted them. *These are not Gospel teaching*; nor is mandatory celibacy to be found in Scripture. They are flawed *à la carte* innovations which, in accordance with St. Paul's teaching must be condemned. It is above all priests who have married, priests in clandestine relationships, and the married laity who must ceaselessly point to this error. Lack of subjective experience of married love in popes down to priests like Fr. Finigan have done unutterable damage not only to the credibility of the Church in the outside world, but to the men who give their lives to serve her; men who according to St. Paul ought to be teaching the gospel, and only the gospel!

Yes, Benedict is right in his view that 'one of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation' Alas he has misunderstood the teaching of Genesis, where God's own answer to that loneliness is marriage. Following the *à la carte* teaching of Augustine in the analysis of marriage in the 1994 Catechism, written by Cardinal Ratzinger and John Paul II amongst others, it is declared that 'As a break with God, the first sin had for its consequence the rupture of the original communication between man and woman. Their relations were distorted by mutual recrimination, the Creator's own gift, changed into a relationship of domination and lust' (1607). With St. Paul all the reformist groups in today's Church must continuously speak out and write to remedy the serious damage these departures are still causing to millions of their unfortunate flock, but more especially to the shepherds of that flock by denying them that relationship which can be the basis for 'maturing personal identity,' and with it return to Christ's own teaching on sexuality in marriage.