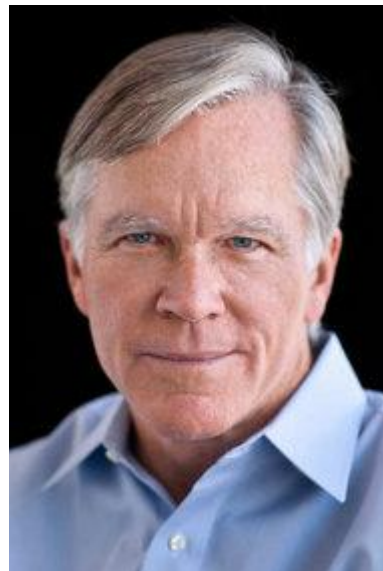


# Sex and the Single Priest

By [BILL KELLER](#)

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Among the teaching nuns at St. Matthew's Catholic School, Sister Mary Robert was my favorite. She was young, not yet 30, with a gentle face framed by the starched white wimple. She tamed a classroom of hormone-dizzy eighth graders by making us want to please her. We offered up our compositions and our ventures in iambic pentameter, and were rewarded with encouragement that, at least in my case, never wore off.



Not many years after I left St. Matthew's, I left the church. Leaving your church is not so much like quitting a club as emigrating from the country where you grew up. You forfeit citizenship and no longer consider yourself subject to its laws, but you follow the news from the Old Country and wish its people well, because they are still in some sense your people. And if you write for a living you may sometimes write about that world, from a distance.

Last year, 50 years after eighth-grade graduation, Sister Mary Robert saw something I wrote on this subject and sent me a letter. Only she was no longer Sister Mary Robert. She had met a priest, Father John Hydar. They fell in love and, after extricating themselves from their respective religious vows, they married. At the time of her letter the marriage of Roberta (her reclaimed birth name) and John Hydar was in its 41st year, and it seemed to be a happy one.

If I'm an émigré from the country of Catholicism, the Hydars would be best described as dissidents who stayed. They ended up in one of the many small communities of disaffected Catholics where women are ordained, same-sex marriages are blessed, and members of the clergy are not required to endure the loneliness of celibacy. Eventually John began ministering to these Catholics on the margins. As one of four married priests at St. Anthony's Community in Santa Barbara, Calif., he baptized children and presided over weddings and funerals. Sometimes he was invited to fill in at short-handed mainstream Catholic parishes, with a wink from the archdiocese. In the view of the official church they were outliers, if not outcasts, but in their own view they were the

real Catholics, waiting for Rome to wise up. “My husband and I may not live to see the fruits of our labors,” Roberta wrote to me, “but in the meantime we find new ways to be Catholic, believing that the Spirit is on the move and there is no stopping Her by the institutional church.” That “Her” made me smile.

Enter the new pope, Francis, who has heartened many progressive Catholics and infuriated many Catholic conservatives by suggesting that Jesus did not intend to establish a legion of scolds. The pope’s efforts to promote a more tolerant tone and to reorient the church’s priorities from inquisition to compassion are mostly words. I do not mean that as a slight. The kindness of his language, his empathy for the least among us, and the humility of his example are undeniably refreshing. Still, at some point Francis will, and should, be judged by the substance of his leadership. What should we look for?

Much of the social agenda that church reformers like the Hydars advocate – full ordination of women, full equality for gays, an end to the widely ignored prohibition on birth control – is so entangled in past papal proclamations and historical precedents that I doubt Francis will take the issues on. An “apostolic exhortation” the pope released last week was a heartfelt appeal for inclusiveness – but on the Vatican’s familiar terms.

There is one issue, however, where the internal politics, while difficult, are less difficult, where the case for reform is pressing, and where there are hints that Francis may be inclined to change. That is priestly celibacy.

The arguments for lifting the requirement that priests forswear sex and marriage are not new, but they have become more urgent. Mandatory celibacy has driven away many good priests and prospects at a time when parishes in Europe and the United States are closing for lack of clergy. It deprives priests of experience that would make them more competent to counsel the families they minister. Celibacy – by breeding a culture of sexual exceptionalism and denial – surely played some role in the church’s shameful record of pedophilia and cover-up.

“Lots of people don’t see [celibacy] as some extraordinary act of witness,” said Thomas Groome, who heads the department of religious education and pastoral ministry at Boston College. “They see it as just a peculiar lifestyle, and one not to be trusted.” Groome was a priest for 17 years but left to be a husband and father. “The loneliness of it, I think, can drive people crazy,” he told me. “I’ve known hundreds of priests in my

life,” from student days in an Irish seminary through the priesthood and decades as a theologian. “I don’t know too many diocesan priests, maybe three or four, who have lived a rich, life-giving, celibate lifestyle.”

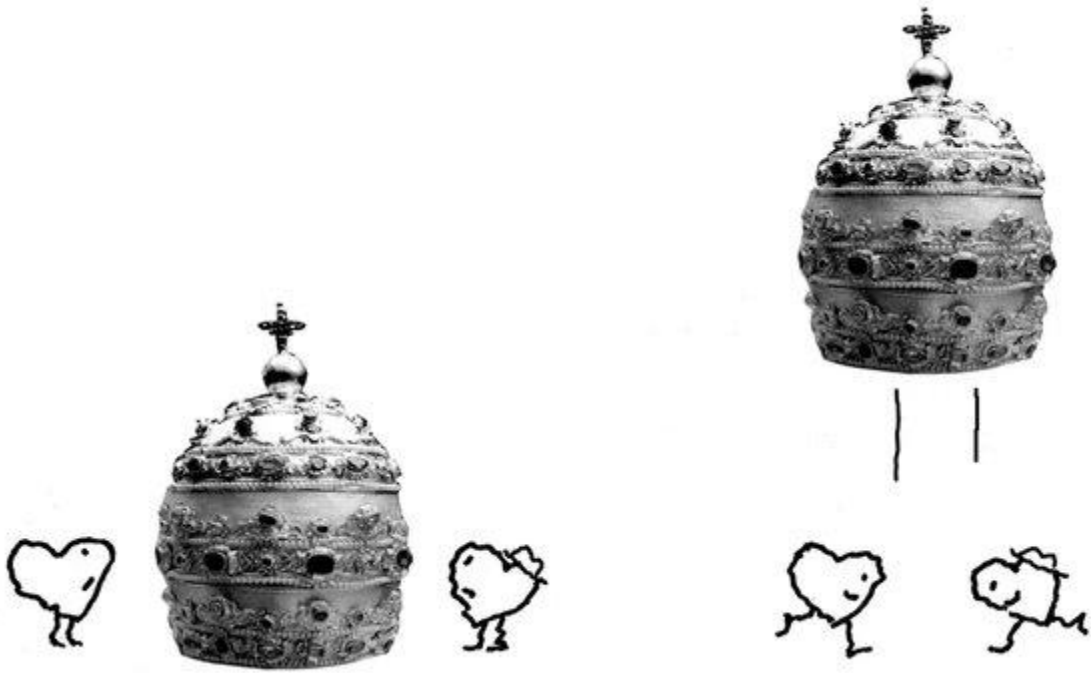
The requirement that priests be celibate is not a doctrine but a cultural and historical aberration. The first apostles had wives. Catholic clergy were free to marry for the first millennium, until a series of church councils in the 12th century changed the rules, motivated in part by financial disputes. (Priests were trying to pass on church property to their children; the crude remedy was to deny them children.)

There are, in fact, many married priests in the Catholic Church, priests who were ordained in the Eastern traditions of Catholicism as well as Anglicans and other married priests whose families were grandfathered in when they converted to the Church of Rome. In parts of Latin America and Africa, priests marry or have common law wives and the church looks the other way. Francis knows this well. As archbishop of Buenos Aires, the future pope befriended a radical and famously noncelibate bishop, Jeronimo Podesta, ministered to him on his deathbed, and remained close for years thereafter to Podesta’s widow, who recalls that they often discussed the issue of celibacy.

Francis’s intentions have been a subject of intense speculation in church circles since September, when Archbishop Pietro Parolin, a Francis confidant and second in command at the Vatican, told an interviewer that celibacy “is not a church dogma and it can be discussed because it is a church tradition.” Parolin qualified his remarks (“We cannot simply say that it is part of the past”), but his declaration that the subject “can be discussed” guaranteed that it would be.

ONE place it has been much discussed is among the married priests in the dissident parish where John and Roberta Hydar found sanctuary. John told me that if celibacy had been optional back in the ’60s, “most of us would have remained in active ministry” (although “most of us would also have gotten in hot water” over other disagreements with Vatican policy). He admitted taking a little sinful pleasure in the discomfort Francis has caused among Catholic hard-liners: “Well, the shoe is on the other foot now.” And he said he can even imagine that Francis, given 10 or 15 years of good health, might change the church sufficiently — not to win back lost causes like me, but to make Catholics like my old teacher and her husband feel at home there again. John Hydar will be watching, with keen hope, but without his wife. Roberta Hydar died of cancer on Oct. 18 at the age of 79.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/02/opinion/keller-sex-and-the-single-priest.html?hp&rref=opinion&r=1&>



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