

Celibacy IS the Issue

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In response to the lengthy July 31 Sunday Extra expose featuring the group Celibacy is the Issue (CITI) with stories of men who have abandoned their celibate promise in order to marry and have biological families, we feel compelled to assert the truth about the celibate charism in priestly life.

In the ordination rite of a transitional deacon (a man's final step to priesthood) the bishop speaks these words to him before he takes his promise of celibacy: "You shall exercise this ministry in the celibate state for celibacy is both a sign and a motive of pastoral charity, and a special source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world." Simply put, the Church believes priests are "married" and are "fathers" both ontologically and experientially.

While it is true celibacy is not intrinsic to the ordained ministry in the Latin Rite, the man who hears Christ's call to the priesthood today is also called to live a celibate, committed, fruitful love. He is not called to simply live celibately; he is called to love celibately. The simplistic arguments that the Church implemented celibacy because of mere real estate concerns or to promote a mirage of clerical mysticism are distorted at best and undermine Christ's clear value of chastity, virginity and committed loves at their worst.

The priest, in truth, is both father and husband. In his Letter to the Ephesians St. Paul wrote, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her" (Eph. 5:25). St. Paul understood Jesus Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church. Priests, through ordination, are wedded to the Church and thereafter stand in the Person of Christ the Bridegroom. This is most real when the priest celebrates the Mass. To abandon his celibate promise is to leave his first bride. The notion of spiritual fatherhood is also rooted in Scripture. St. Paul believed he was a father to all. He wrote, "Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel." (1 Corinthians 4:15).

It might be asked, however, how does celibacy enable the priest to live as a father and husband on a day to day to basis? A most poignant example is when the priest answers the rectory phone at 2:00 AM only to find a distraught parent on the other line, virtually inconsolable. What does he do?

Without hesitation, not encumbered by real concerns for his own biological family, he goes to the hospital to be with the parents as their teenage child who was in a car accident clings to life. At that moment the priest is present as spiritual father to the family and friends; he stands with his children of all ages in a unique and real relationship. Through his celibacy he possesses a radical availability to God's people. John Paul II was a great family man and spiritual father as most priests are. Celibacy is a gift to the Church and the world.

It is important to assert the priest is not a spiritual bachelor. We do not live a cold, isolated existence. In fact, we share an intimacy with Christ and his people that is grounded and real in the human experience. At times this intimacy is so profound, varied and extensive that at the end of the day it leaves no recourse but to be on our knees in solitude and prayer. As celibates we have real human emotions, real struggles, and real relationships with many people. There is fatigue, joy, sorrow and love. The celibate love of the priest requires integration of sexuality, emotions and the spiritual as with any vocation. Lack of integration or emotive maturity leads to destructive behaviors as we all know too well. While celibacy is not intrinsic to priesthood, sacrifice is. Many modern spiritualities eschew the notion of sacrifice. Might this also be contributing to deep misgivings and suspicions of the celibate charism?

Jesus Christ is the Ideal of the priest. He, the Son of God, raised marriage to a covenant, was celibate (contrary to widespread disparities in best selling fictional novels), and he issued an invitation to those who can accept it to follow him in the celibate state "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12). As celibate priests, we are called to love the Church in the same way as Christ the Bridegroom. Perhaps the most troubling quote in the article was from former celibate Terence McDonough who, according to his misguided "revelation," asserted, "Everyone called me 'father' but I was never going to be one." Our response is, everyone calls us "Father" and we know we really are.