

Mandatory Celibacy: Time to Discuss Its Flaws

Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church, in particular, are in crisis. For the past 30 years theologians, ecclesiologists, sociologists and historians have documented this crisis—one with great peril for the established Church but also, as in any crisis, one with potential for decisions and new choices.

I see those opportunities as a challenge for the laity, to address the rifts that divide the People of God from our ordained leadership. More, I see opportunities for lay people to lead in a situation that demands our voices be heard. The time is long past to examine the flaws in our ministerial social fabric. If our ordained hierarchical leadership cannot or will not address the centuries-long rift separating the baptized People of God, then the non-ordained baptized must step forward as Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium*, challenged us to do.

It is not pleasant to call our leaders to account. But the Church institution that seeks to nourish us spiritually is failing in its responsibility, and a primary cause of its failure is the negative aspects of clericalism—a mindset that elevates celibate males to a “ruling caste” status, thus creating an elitist barrier to unity, dividing the faithful in the Body of Christ from those who would minister.

Mandatory or compulsory celibacy feeds this clerical mindset. As Catholics we have heard centuries of pious exhortations and homilies that insist, “virginal men devote their time more fully to the service of God.” But celibacy too frequently is a promise not kept, a hollow promise that has instead contributed to centuries of injustice. Likewise, celibacy based on the concept that a life fully pleasing to God can only be lived by closing off the secular world has contributed to centuries of demeaning lay people and smothering the message of Christ.

Do I seek to denigrate the sincere celibacy of many over history? Never! For some brothers and sisters, celibacy is both a healthy and a positive choice. But many young men answer the call to a celibate life without fully grasping its demands. Then, as loneliness pervades their daily lives and reality sets in, many seek outlets to help them cope—and secrecy to hide their choices.

Our Church cloaks these lapses with a self-serving justification that nurtures the clergy caste and forbids official discussion even while today’s research into theology, psychology, history and social theory brings into focus the questionable contribution of mandatory celibacy to an effective ministry.

The Benedictines provide a concise summary of the problems with mandatory celibacy:

Clerical celibacy is called into question for various reasons: it is not intrinsic to priesthood; it is not essentially more perfect than married love; its historical origins are suspect, coming from a neo-Platonic view of sexuality and Old Testament ideas of ritual purity; there is evidence that its observation has always been problematic, at least for a significant minority, leading to the adage *si non caste, tamen caute* (“if unchaste, be discreet”); celibacy, being a charism, cannot be imposed; it can,

and again for a significant number does, lead to a stunted affective life and immaturity in relationships. The most significant argument against a law of celibacy, however, is the assertion that because of it the Christian people are in places being seriously deprived of the Eucharist. — from “Celibacy of the Clergy,” *Ecclesia* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996)

A most incisive and insightful comment from this analysis is the questioning of the hierarchy’s framing of celibacy as a “charism.” A charism is a free gift of the Almighty; it cannot be imposed upon a human being. When a man is called to the ordained ministry, who is able to decide if he has the charism? If it is the bishop, then bishops from the earliest centuries have sadly failed in their discernment of those who sought ordination, because the history of celibacy does not offer evidence of mature and total dedication to the celibate life.

Celibacy must be optional. The individual must decide for himself what path keeps him closest to Christ. Mandatory celibacy is an outright injustice to the People of God. Individuals should have the right to choose whether to marry or not marry, regardless of their ministry.

Celibacy also tends to breed misogyny, a side effect that Catholicism has unofficially propagated throughout its history, despite its frequent claims to the contrary. Mandatory celibacy has become a steel band that binds together injustice toward women, clericalism, and the closing of ministry to married men.

It was not always so. Marriage anchored the early Church leadership and community. The earliest apostles, steeped in the Torah, understood that “it is not good for the human being to be alone.” Moreover, for them marriage was not simply a resource for stable sexual partnership, it also was universally valued as the path for reaching individual and social fulfillment. It is crucial that we re-teach the People of God that being wed is not a second-class spiritual status in the Church.

Elitism has been rampant for most of the Church’s history. Vatican II, however, made it clear that we are all the Church. The Council strongly affirmed the spiritual equality of all the People of God, both lay and ordained, and attempted to counter this elitism. We can continue this effort by returning to optional celibacy for our ministers. Optional celibacy will rebuild a healthy ministry, a balanced ministry, and a leadership anchored in the reality of the human condition.

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