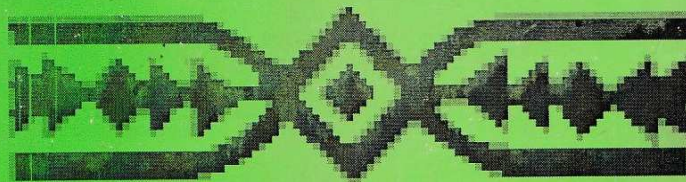


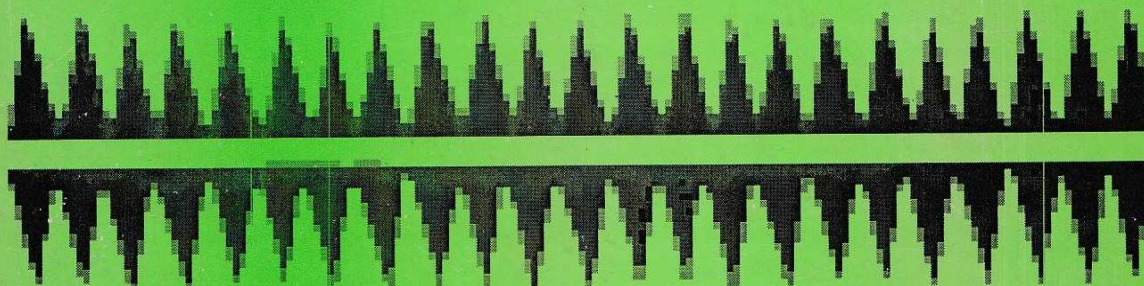
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***CELIBACY IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH:
MEANING, SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS
AND SUSTAINABILITY.***

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ABSTRACT

The paper which examines the origin and development of the celibate culture in the Roman Catholic priesthood reveals that celibacy as an aspect of the priesthood was not part of the character of the priesthood ab initio. Before the fourth century when the priesthood assumed the celibate character priests were not differentiated from the lay faithful in life style except when on official assignments. Two major reasons justified the institution of priestly celibacy: the fear of expropriation of church property and the need for the sacralization and mythologization of the clerical personality in line with the Old Testament priesthood. Population and disease control as well as dedication to duty rank among its social benefits; while its disadvantages include: discouragement of potential candidates for the priestly ministry, increasing sexual immorality among clerics, reduction in the labour force in simple societies, encouragement of prostitution by excess/unmarried women in the population, negative emotional outlet and the negative image of priests as cultural misfits in the African context. In view of the above overwhelming disadvantages, the paper recommends the incorporation of sexual education and sexual counseling into seminary curricula and a call on the Roman Catholic church to reconsider her present policy on celibacy requirement as a condition for priestly service and to implement instead optional celibacy in order to save both institutions, celibacy and priesthood, from total collapse.

INTRODUCTION

Year after year, many Catholic youths in their early adolescence are seen undergoing with unimaginable anxiety what is, in fact, a long period of years of training that leads, through the Christian religious rite of ordination into the Catholic Priesthood. The period of priestly training varies from Diocese to diocese and from Country to country. Excluding the years of junior seminary formation which is the equivalent of the six years of secondary education in the public school system, the actual training period for the Priesthood generally vacillates between a period of eight to ten years. Except in extraordinary cases, the formation period could extend far beyond the regular ten-year duration, but never below a minimum of eight, even after adjusting for individual diocesan needs. The major seminary formation period is meant to expose the candidate to the studies of philosophy and theology, four years each, and other areas of the catholic doctrine and history.

During this duration which is primarily scholastic the candidate's academic career may be intercepted by one or more years of apostolic work for practical experience in view of the Challenging ministry ahead. Another reason in justification of the long preparatory period is to give the prospective candidate the opportunity to assess himself in terms of his willingness and readiness to embrace for life the demands of the priesthood and all that it entails. In some cases the authorities and all those involved with, and responsible for, the candidate's formation may recommend voluntary withdrawal and/or face outright dismissal from the institution if the candidate manifests some signs indicative of ill-suited performance in the future ministry. In not a few instances a whole batch has been known to suffer a drop-out rate of 70- 80% or more of the initial contingents due to inability to cope with, and survive, the rigorous training demands of the formation years.

A candidate offering himself voluntarily for the priestly career is expected to excel in all ramifications: physical fitness, sound morality and intellectual capability. He must be, in fact, a fully balanced personality in every sense. These are necessary expectations since he is to offer himself to God and, needless to emphasize, God deserves the very best. The long period of training is further meant to acquaint the prospective candidate with the absolute requirement of never having to marry for as long as he remains a Roman Catholic priest. In fact, part of the need for the many years of preparation outside of academic reason is to help the candidate acquire sufficient self control in matters of sex and sexual companionship and to embark on self appraisal in that regard before a final decision is made. The voluntary decision on the part of the candidate is of utmost importance because in the Roman Catholic tradition, once the vow of celibacy is freely made, the priest is bound to a single life for ever. (The celibate rule is not required of the Catholic priesthood of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, for which the decision to marry or not to marry has remained optional to this day). The variation in celibacy requirement for the Eastern Catholics has been affirmed by the Second Vatican Council. In the words of the Council, "...while recommending ecclesiastical celibacy, this sacred council does not by any means aim at changing that contrary discipline which is lawfully practised in the Eastern churches..." (Flannery, 1965:892). In addition, the council clearly emphasizes the candidate's free pre-disposition in embracing the celibate state as prescribed by Roman Catholicism for those concerned. Accordingly, the council states as follows: Although it is

true that it is not demanded of the priesthood by its nature.... this sacred council exhorts all priests who... have of their own free choice accepted consecrated celibacy to hold fast to it with courage and enthusiasm and to persevere faithfully in this state (Flannery, *ibid*: 893). This paper is not a theological treatise on the validity or justification of the age-old celibate practice in the Roman Catholic priesthood. It does not even seek answers to such questions as: Why would a young man in his spring of life offer himself to such an almost superhuman requirement? Why does the Roman Catholic Church impose celibacy on her priests? Would a non-celibate priesthood necessarily invalidate the priestly character? etc. These and many similar questions are beyond the scope of this write-up. The paper, instead, considers the law of a celibate catholic priesthood as a given in the Roman tradition. Given its major thrust, the paper attempts at assessing the social significance, or otherwise, of the celibate culture. In other words, the paper assesses how celibacy affects the social order and is in turn affected by it as well as the entire ecclesiastical structure. In order to achieve the above goal, the paper is organized as follows: (i) Conceptual clarification; (ii) Brief history of priestly celibacy (iii) The religious implication of celibacy; (iv) The social implications of celibacy; (v) conclusion.

CONCEPTUAL CLIRIFICATION

In order to properly focus the discussion that follows, it is necessary to clarify certain crucial concepts as they apply in the paper. These include:

1. Celibacy
2. Roman Catholicism
3. Eastern Orthodox Communion

CELIBACY: The word derives from the Latin word CALEBS meaning alone. It refers to a person living alone without a life partner of the opposite sex. The meaning of CELIBACY is closely tied to chastity. Chastity means neither the lack of sexual experience (i.e having at no time in one's life voluntarily actualized one's nature-endowed power of generation) nor the unmarried state as such. It is, instead, the resolution to observe permanent sexual abstinence "for the sake of the Kingdom of God" (Mt: 19:10ff). When the practice of chastity is imposed upon the cleric by a regulation of the church's discipline, and the cleric in turn voluntarily accepts the imposition, we speak of celibacy. While it is important to acknowledge the existence of non-married people in society, it must be pointed out that the Roman Catholic Church is the only large institution in the modern world that gives structured support to unmarried life-styles.

EASTERN ORTHODOX VS ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Catholicism had remained one united religious entity under the Roman pontiff until the ninth century when it witnessed the great separation (schism) of the Eastern (Greek and Slavonic) catholic churches from the Roman authority on grounds of theological, doctrinal and liturgical differences. While these churches agree on the need for separation from Rome, they are however not united on certain theological and administrative principles especially on the primacy of the Roman Pope. Accordingly some of these Eastern Catholic Churches, commonly called Eastern Orthodox, although autonomous are still in

communion with Rome (Rahner and Vorgrimler, 1965:141), while others are independent of Rome both in doctrine and discipline. Those separated from Rome go under the spiritual leadership of Patriarch. Celibacy remains the one visible difference between the Roman and Eastern Orthodox priesthoods. While the vow of celibacy remains optional for the Eastern Orthodox priesthood, it is mandatory for the Roman Catholics.

BRIEF HISTORY OF PRIESTLY CELIBACY

Married clergy existed in the Catholic Church as in other world religions long before the introduction of the celibate priesthood. Among the world religions, Roman Catholicism is the only religious body that requires celibacy as a condition for its ordained ministers. In fact other religious organizations not only recommend marriage as part of a complete life, but repudiate the very idea of unmarried life for their clergy. This point of view is common in Judaism, Islam and Buddhism, etc. In the thinking of the prophet, Mohammed, for instance, an unmarried man must not be trusted with responsibility, while the Jewish rabbinic school forbids the celibate from instructing, especially the young. In line with this ancient tradition, Roman Catholicism before the split in the ninth and eleventh centuries had practiced a religious life that made no distinction between its clergy and the lay faithful in matters of marriage. As a cherished value, however, celibacy was recommended to priests as a matter of freedom of choice in the early days of the church as is the practice today in the Eastern Communion. Therefore, the church functioned for the most part with a married clergy.

The present state of affairs of clerical celibacy came in the middle Ages. Bokenkotter (1979:64) notes that before the middle Ages the clergy were not sharply differentiated from the laity in life-style. The clergy married, raised families and earned their livelihood at some trade or profession. As the practice grew of paying them for their clerical work, they withdrew more and more from secular pursuits until such withdrawal was deemed obligatory by the fourth century. The withdrawal from secular concerns along with emphasis on ritualistic ministry led to clerical sacralization. Bokenkotter further observes that clerical sacralization and my thologization with celibacy as part of the process were the results of various stages of theological, liturgical and legal developments. In furtherance of the process, a more elaborate liturgy with features borrowed from old Testament priesthood and paganism combined to portray the image of the clergy as a separate and sacred personality. With this development came also an historically dramatic shift in the very idea of the sacred.

By the time of the Roman Emperor, Constantine, in the fourth century, the whole church was considered the realm of the sacred as opposed to the profane world outside, the emperor himself having turned christian. A clear distinction of this sacred character was to be found in the requirement of celibacy for the clergy. This requirement was seen as necessary on the ground that sexual intercourse was incompatible with the sacred character of the clerical state. The first ever legislation to this effect was passed at the local synod of Elvira in Spain while Pope Siricius (d.399) became the first to enforce clerical celibacy.

By the middle of the eleventh century clerical celibacy had fallen into decay as a result of abuses by clerics and Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) restored it with an edict. At the second Lateran council in 1139 all clerical marriage was declared null and void in

order to forestall the expropriation of church property and ensure single mindedness in the discharge of their sacred duties. The practice has since been held in the Roman Catholic church until today with the second Vatican council's approval and confirmation of the legislation "so far as it concerns those destined for the priesthood" (Flannery, ibid. 893).

Celibacy in the religious sense has a longer history than the above sketch. Church historians have informed us that it was first practiced among the Essenes, a religious settlement in Qumran in Ancient Palestine before the Christian era. As a monastic culture, they held all things in common including meals and spiritual exercises with an absolute prohibition on marriage. They were considered "men of holiness" because they were expected to satisfy all demands for the highest possible purity including ritual baths and fasting (Ehrlich, 1962:120). So celibacy has a highly esteemed pre-Christian origin.

THE RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF CELIBACY

That married priests, existed before celibate priesthood was introduced in the Roman Catholic church has been noted. The primitive Church as we saw knew nothing of a celibate priesthood until about the fourth century. In an effort to de-emphasize the role of celibacy in the priestly ministry, some catholic theologians have argued, and rightly so, that the divine and religious call to priestly role, and the almost prophetic call to celibate lifestyle are two distinct vocations and that the attempt to bind the two together has the capacity of ruining both. In response the church, citing Mt. 19:12 that "there are eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God emphasizes that the celibate state is highly recommended by Christ. According to the church's teaching on the subject, "... celibacy is a sign of pastoral charity and an incentive to it as well as being in a special way a source of spiritual fruitfulness to the world (Flannery, ibid. 893). It is in recognition of the above value that the Roman Church has insisted on its sustenance for centuries until the present. The above Vatican 11 document states further that by embracing the celibate state, priests are consecrated in a new and excellent way to Christ as they more readily cling to him with undivided heart and dedicate themselves more freely to the service to God and men. Therefore, by means of celibacy, priests profess before men their willingness to be dedicated with undivided loyalty to the ministerial task entrusted to them.

In support of the official position of the church on the matter and seeing the church as a prophetic institution, Keane submits that celibacy is a sign of prophetic witness, a style that travels lightly and tries to set people free in this world, so that all might see more clearly the Christian faith in the resurrection of Christ (Keane, ibid: 154). The testimony of a former Catholic Priest adds more support to the above evidence. Former Roman Catholic Priest, Charles Davis, on leaving the church after fifteen years of priestly ministry on grounds other than the burden of celibacy had this to say: "I still regard celibacy as a meaningful vocation. I see it as a free undertaking of a privation in loving dedication to Christ. The celibate surrenders the normal human fulfillment of marriage and parenthood in order to become a sign of Christ's message of hope in a world where so many are suffering and deprived" (Davis, 1967:24).

Therefore, despite the many problems associated with the religious practice of celibacy, like instances of unfaithfulness to vows on the part of some ministers, and such unfaithfulness does not show forth only in regard to celibacy, the deep religious

significance of the practice has been testified to over the centuries. Isolated cases of abuse do not nullify the proven benefits of a long standing practice –abusus non tollit usum. Although the negative aspects of celibacy will be looked into shortly, one outstanding disadvantage of celibacy is worth mentioning as it affects the religious sphere. This has to do with its capacity to limit priestly vocations, i.e the number of young people willing to offer their services to God. The truth of this assessment is certain because, in an increasing frequency, many young people are sincerely scared and discouraged by the implication of the vow, and their ability to cope. As earlier noted, not all those who feel called to serve God as priests feel they have also the call to the almost heroic charism of celibacy. Therefore, uncertain of their ability to live the celibate life, they prefer not to embrace the priestly vocation at all. The requirement limits to a great extent the number of potential candidates.

THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF CELIBACY

The main thrust of this article centres around the effects of the Roman Catholic celibate priesthood on the larger society. In undertaking this analysis, the writer is inviting scholars to direct more attention to this important area of social life by examining more seriously than ever before the interaction between celibacy and social life. The paucity of relevant literature on the subject is an indication of the obvious neglect of the area by both social scientists generally and the sociologists of religion in particular, the former because of the non inclination of so-called celibate values to easy scientific probity the latter because of their preference for contemporary issues, whereas celibacy would rather be considered an ancient behaviour that should not attract more than a passing interest. As an aspect of religious behaviour, the problem deserves more attention by experts than is presently accorded.

An important question at this point is: what effect does celibacy as a way of life have on modern society? In order to answer the above question, it is necessary to underscore the fact that the church as a religious organization pursues values and ultimate objectives that sometimes differ from those of secular human social institutions. The church pursues ultimate values as against the temporary objectives of other social institutions. Such differences in goal setting, of course, must not be considered as mutually exclusive since they complement each other toward the well being of the human person. Whereas the church deals on the spiritual well being of her members primarily, other social institutions focus on this- worldly issues. In terms of role evaluation, the church has an advantage over the secular society. For example, while the church can and does make occasional incursions into the secular sphere, like politics and economics, the secular society is not by any means equipped with the basic qualifications to arbitrate in matters of exclusive divine character, like dogma and the role of the spirit. These differences in role evaluation make it improper to subject celibacy to equal social and religious weighting but rather help explain why celibate values have never been fully appreciated on the social scene from biblical times

In order to emphasize ancient repudiation of, and hatred for, celibate life-style, the old testament places a curse on the man who terminates a progeny and to ensure procreation and the continued survival of the human species, Deuteronomy, 25:5-6 advices

a man to marry the wife of his deceased brother and to beget children in the deceased brother's name. Yet despite its lack of attraction even from antiquity, celibate behaviour does record certain latent advantages. Among the social gains of celibacy, the following can be cited:

Population control. Weeks (1981) warns that while the invention of tools, domestication skills, science and technology have a great potential for human progress, they also help to increase the number of people inhabiting the planet through improved standard of living and medical advancement. The danger of population explosion is as great as its devastation by nuclear warfare. Fearful of the impending dangers of population explosion measures have been suggested by demographers to contend the tide. Among the measures included in the so-called preventive checks of the 19th century English demographer, Thomas Malthus towards population control were sexual abstinence, contraception and abortion. Although the above measures did not take into consideration their moral implications, Malthus placed more emphasis on those behavioural attributes that corresponded to moral rectitude like abstinence and marriage deferment (Malthus, 1872. in Weeks 1981:24 – 25). In support of the Malthusian argument, Saunder (in Russell, 1970:121) notes that voluntary restriction of sex (abstinence) has been practiced in almost all ages and times and has been more effective in preserving a stationary population. By endorsing abstinence (Malthus) or continence (Russell), Roman Catholicism puts an end to all other methods of population control that defy moral expectation: abortion, contraception and infanticide etc. Celibacy viewed through the social lens is the moral equivalent of continence or abstinence for population control and can be a very welcome idea in places of unwholesome population boom like China, India and some of the developing nations.

Celibacy has the capacity of encouraging high productivity through faithfulness and dedication to duty. Unmarried employees, freed from family and marital responsibilities, are committed to their professions with unencumbered singleness of purpose and can accept distant transfers without grudges. Employers of labour are known for their preference for employees of the unmarried state since experience shows that family related absenteeisms account for the greater percentage of low productivity in both the civil service and industry. Furthermore, where work requires a high degree of mental concentration, like in academics, the unattached is more likely to deliver better output than otherwise.

Finally, since the outbreak of the dreaded HIV/AIDs scourge and its defiance of all kinds of medical efforts, the clarion call on humanity as a whole has been to keep either one sex partner or stay off sexual intercourse. No doubt, celibacy remains the best option to the elimination of AIDs and its fatal consequences.

The negative social aspects of celibacy: Aside from the above benefits, quite a member of social disadvantages can be associated with celibate culture. The social ills of celibacy can be identified to include:

i) Reduction in the labour force: in a situation where celibacy is practiced on a wide scale, it is capable of reducing drastically the size of the labour force because in a typical traditional and non technologically driven society, human capital is the economic

mainstay. In such a society, the benefits a man would have from the wife working for him and the children working in the field or tending beasts would be denied him. So celibacy has a negative economic dimension.

ii) Except in an exceptional situation females have a higher ratio to males in the population. The artificial imbalance resulting from celibacy creates additional problems of excess females in the population especially for the marital institution. This development can easily drive the female folk into a life of prostitution as career, leading eventually to social menace. Russell (1970:75) has contended that the need for prostitution and fornication arises in societies where many men are either unmarried or are away from their wives on a journey.

iii) The perceived benefits of celibacy can becloud another aspect of social evil, i.e. the tendency forwards a life of vagabondage by the unmarried due to lack of necessary mutual control and monitoring by a legitimate life partner. Marriage has the ability to provide companionship to partners, thereby shielding them from loose living and the dangers associated with it.

iv). Human sexuality has a psycho-emotional dimension which must be maturely managed by the celibate to avoid the release of negative psychobehavioral consequences. Pointing out that prolonged virginity, i.e. celibacy, can lead to intellectual timidity, among other dangers, Russell observed that

... a person who has had no experience of sex and has considered it important to preserve his virtue has been engaged in a negative reaction, tinged with fear, and has, therefore, as a rule, become timid, while at the same time instinctive, unconscious jealousy has filled him with disapproval of normal people, and with a desire to punish those who have enjoyed what he has foregone ...

(RUSSELL, 1970:141)

The above view has been re-enforced by Philip Keane who, in his study of the negative behavioural impact of celibate life narrated the experience of two religious women in a religious community. According to Keane, the report is not totally fictitious. In the report, one of the religious women who had occasional sexual involvement while still in the community related well with other members of the community. The other who adhered strictly to her religious vows of celibacy was consistently selfish and unloving with the result that she recorded a negative impact on the life of the religious community and the parish at large (Keane, 1977:156). This is the result of the undue suppression of sexual energy which, like steam, must have an outlet. These observations show that although many unmarried men and women of conventional virtue have been recorded, and these deserve the highest admiration from every possible point of view, the tendency to display negative behavioural patterns by celibates is indeed high.

v) Finally there is a cultural dimension to celibacy when measured against the African

world-view. Unlike the situation in the western world where the single state is fashionable, almost to the point of a vocation, Africans see it differently. African anthropology considers as incomplete a life that is not lived in companionship with another of the opposite gender. Economic motivations aside, procreation is the African's measure of manliness. According to this mentality, every act of sexuality must remain open to the creative act. That is why any effort to induce artificial or unnatural infecundity or directly obstruct fertility is considered unethical. To the extent that this mentality is widespread, every instance of family planning, natural or induced, is considered uncultural, embarrassing and absurd. This cultural heritage explains further the African preference for the large and extended family system.

One of the bones of contention that early converts to christianity faced was the idea of the christian priesthood with its concept of celibacy. Infact, the pioneer African converts who were also attracted to the catholic priesthood had to face either disapproval or outright rejection by family and social groups. Some of those who succeeded still face the stigma of being considered defective personalities. On a similar note, priests, because of their celibate life styles have been accused of embarking on a life of selfishness and living in comforter bachelordom. They are said to deprive fellow human beings of their love and companionship in matters of sex, among others. They are believed to be insensitive to the needs of others whom they deprive of the joy of societally approved sexual encounter. With this mistaken notion, they believe that the celibate, like the fly in the heart of an apple lives in perpetual sweetness. The above testify to the social disadvantages of celibacy as it applies to the Roman Catholic Priesthood.

CONCLUSION

The paper is an attempt at analyzing the celibate culture as it is practiced in the Roman Catholic priesthood. Of particular interest has been the effect which the practice of celibacy in the church has on the open secular society. The study has noted both the negative and positive aspects of the practice. From the foregoing, it appears obvious that the negative effects of celibacy have outweighed the positive in the areas of its social relevance, although in embarking upon the practice, the church's intention is primarily religious. This should always be borne in mind.

Considering some of the negative attributes of celibacy, both social and religious, the church might consider a re-think of her present position in regard to its continued existence. In view of the importance and proper understanding of human sexuality and the theological fact that celibacy is not an integral part of the nature of the priesthood, it is suggested that the vows of celibacy be made optional for clerics as was the case in the early church in order not to limit unnecessarily the chances of those young men who might feel a genuine desire to serve the church in their capacity as priests without feeling the call to celibate life.

Optional celibacy can further have the additional advantage of reducing the increasing embarrassment and scandal in sexual immorality now witnessed among the clergy. For the purpose of effective witnessing the celibate mentality as well as the personal-communal (biological) aspects are important. However, before the attempt at re-examining the present policy on priestly celibacy, seminary formation should consider

inculcating sex counselling and sex education into seminary curricula since chastity is more of a problem of the heart, mind and emotion than of the sexual organs (Onyeocha, 1991:92). This will further equip the future priests with the basic facts about sexuality in view of their necessary contacts with members of the opposite sex during their ministry. Since celibacy in the sense discussed in this paper is limited to the religious dimension, it is suggested that it be seen neither as functional nor dysfunctional in terms of its social role but simply as non functional in order to portray its social neutrality.

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