

# The Beauty of Priestly Celibacy

by Father Carter Griffin

It is a difficult time in the Catholic priesthood. Far too many priests are unfaithful, violating their promise of celibacy in public and notorious ways. Some are actively homosexual, preying upon young men. Worldly and decadent priestly lifestyles oppose the poverty of spirit they profess at their ordination. Good priests are stretched too thin. Many bishops are lax in their spiritual fatherhood, and their response to rampant corruption is woefully inadequate.

I am not describing the Church of today, but that of 1,000 years ago. It is a sketch of the mid-11th century, when St. Peter Damian began his thunderous crusade to reform the priesthood. With a few variations, it could also be the fourth century, the 10th century, the 16th century or as recently as the 1960s. There was a tremendous need then, as now, for more priests, better priests and more faithful priests. In each of these cases, an exasperated Church took a critical look at the question of priestly celibacy. It is not hard to understand why. There are many perfectly logical reasons to abandon celibacy, and there always have been. The relevant question is: Why did the Latin Rite never do so?

On this date in 1967, Pope St. Paul VI wrote an encyclical entitled *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, in which he addresses the question forthrightly. "It is said," he wrote, "that in the world of our time the observance of celibacy has come to be difficult or even impossible." He then recounts many persuasive arguments for relinquishing celibacy. And yet, he insists, "Priestly celibacy has been guarded by the Church for centuries as a brilliant jewel, and retains its value undiminished even in our time when the outlook of men and the state of the world have undergone such profound changes."

Calls to modify priestly celibacy are quick to point out the hoped-for gains of such proposals, but they seldom consider what would be lost. It is worth asking, then, what did Pope Paul mean when he called it a "brilliant jewel" in the crown of the Church? What is the beauty of celibacy?

Its beauty is, first of all, found in Christ himself. While there are married priests in the Eastern Churches and even, by rare exception, in the Latin Rite, it should be stated clearly that the one Priest of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ, was himself celibate. That is to say, the priesthood itself is celibate. A celibate Catholic priest is, then, a clearer representation of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. This explains, in my experience, why so many of our faithful people are uneasy about proposals to diminish celibacy.

There is an indefinable distinction of a celibate priest of which the People of God are keenly aware, even if they are sometimes unable to put it into words. Such an observation may not have the pragmatic force of a quick fix for a priest shortage, but it should not be set lightly aside.

More tangibly, perhaps, there is a beauty in the capacity of celibacy to open a man's heart to pastoral charity. Jesus spoke of celibacy as a gift that is given "for the sake of the Kingdom of God." Though it is sometimes defined negatively as "not getting married," in fact, celibacy is a positive choice, a powerful way of loving with a singleness of purpose. It enables a priest to live his spiritual fatherhood with particular force and efficacy. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, celibacy is "a source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world," which renders priests "better fitted for a broader acceptance of fatherhood in Christ."

Growing up Protestant, I knew many fine pastors. They were good and generous men. Looking back on it now, however, I realize that when I approached them for help, I could never be the primary focus of their love. Their wives and children deserved that place of priority, and rightly so. For the celibate priest, it is different — when lived well, our entire lives visibly belong to the people we serve. Those who come to us know that they, and they alone, come first.

It is precisely the betrayal of this love, in fact, which makes the deviant behavior of abusive priests so repellent, even to non-Catholics. The powerful sense of outrage at the scandals, which I share, is actually a reflection of the intensity of love to which celibate priests are called. The spiritual fatherhood of priests, so richly enhanced by celibacy, is one of its most beautiful blessings. It is also, unfortunately, almost always omitted in these discussions and why I recently wrote a book on that very topic.

A final underappreciated beauty of celibacy is its unique witness to a world that has suffered the ravages of the sexual revolution. Permissive divorce laws, the prevalence of contraception and extramarital sexual relations, the legalization of abortion and the epidemic of internet pornography have taken an enormous toll on our social fabric and damaged countless families and individual lives, especially the most vulnerable — the unborn, young children and adolescents. The aggressive ideology that underlies these cultural shifts claims that our sexual drive should be released from all religious and moral restraint.

Celibacy, in contrast, exemplifies that restraint; it reveals that a human life can be lived with joy and integrity without sexual activity at all. When Our Lord enjoined celibacy on some of his disciples, he was not making an impossible demand or one that would stunt emotional and psychological growth. The great majority of faithful celibate priests are happy, mature, balanced individuals with levels of personal happiness far above the norm.

Celibacy is therefore an existential threat to the sexual ideology of our time. It is a reminder that true love is found not primarily in sexual activity but in the life of charity which unites us to God and to one another. Indeed, it is only in the context of charity that genuine sexual fulfillment can be found.

Celibacy shows men and women, regardless of their vocation, that the sexual drive can and must be directed to true human flourishing. To those who are unmarried, celibacy shows that a single life can nevertheless be meaningful and joyful since their capacity to love is undiminished. To those who are married, celibacy is a reminder that their beautiful vocation remains ordered to a still higher love in God himself.

There is, without question, a need for more and better priests. There always has been. Nevertheless, relinquishing celibacy would come at a great cost. It is a precious gift to the Church, a “brilliant jewel” whose beauty is sometimes overlooked. Even a carefully circumscribed surrender of celibacy for immediate gains, however well-intentioned, would almost certainly lead the Church down a path of mounting pressure to set it aside more universally.

Like Pope St. Paul VI, I believe the answer will be found not in retreat from celibacy but in its reform. The Church is being called to a greater trust in God, better formation for the celibate priesthood, and a deeper commitment to building a truly Catholic culture.

A culture that unleashes the apostolic potential of the lay faithful and fosters healthy Catholic families, the seedbed of priestly and religious vocations: That is the kind of response which would truly overcome the challenges of the present moment without forfeiting the blessings — and the incomparable beauty — of priestly celibacy.

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