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<54>

Laywoman's View of Priestly Celibacy

by Ida Friederike Görres, 1966

Priestly celibacy, like every virtue, merits reflective consideration in every age of the Church. Especially in our age, which sees the positive values of sex more clearly than hitherto, the reflections of Ida Friederike Görres are helpful toward a deepened understanding of the role of the celibate priest.

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Today even among Catholics, celibacy has become a ticklish question. It has always had its opponents. The Protestant Reformation denied the supererogatory value of virginity. But the objection that celibacy is contrary to nature and inevitably gives rise to scandals has kept this matter a vital issue long afterwards. The “Philosophy of Lights” (Wessenberg) and the “Away from Rome” movement have viewed celibacy as an instrument for centralization of power. Nevertheless, the faithful generally took for granted that celibacy was an integral part of the priesthood. There are three reasons for this idea: (1) the authority and tradition of the Church; (2) the principle of availability, that the priest ought to be free of all family obligations to devote himself completely to his ministry; and above all (3) the “principle of vestalship,” that anything sexual is incompatible with any religious activity, especially the ministry. Today many no longer consider these reasons convincing.

Regarding the first it is argued: Many things in the Church today have undergone change which quite recently were held as absolutely unchangeable. We have acquired a sense for distinguishing the essential from what is changeable and merely historical. Celibacy falls under the second heading. Not only does this institution have no foundation in the NT, but it can even be looked upon as a deviation from apostolic tradition. Though perhaps opportune at some time in the history of the Church, the fact is that it was imposed from above, only at the beginning of the Middle Ages, and for reasons not entirely spiritual. In its present form celibacy appears to be the product of a definite context of social structures and Church politics. Being merely a point of discipline, not of doctrine, celibacy could easily be eliminated from the life of the Church.

The argument of availability likewise seems no longer to hold. History has given us enough examples to show that a wife can often be of help to the minister or doctor in the performance of his duty even up to martyrdom.

The pivot of assault, however, has always been the "principle of vestalship." This is a crisis of the spirit, not of the flesh. Today the battle is carried on under a new way of thinking about man. Among the faithful there has grown a sense of rediscovery of the spiritual value within natural reality.

Though Christian doctrine has always taught a positive attitude towards nature as something created by God and therefore good, Christian spirituality has frequently insisted upon a rejection of the world. Today the movement is towards giving back to the world of nature and matter the respect which Christians owe it in justice. In this process celibacy is claimed as a principal element.

In this context rejection of the world is not deemed a mark of a superior stage in the evolution of religion. Whatever its origin, it is not Christian. It proposes a dualism between spirit (good) and matter (evil). At last the non-Christian character of this attitude is recognized, and efforts are made to ban its expression from the Church.

Faithful suffer strange dualism

Thus does marriage come into the center of the debate. Many of the faithful suffer under a strange dualism. Though they admit the sacramental character of marriage, they consider marriage as merely a concession to the demands of our animal nature, a lesser evil. In this context the priest is forced to submit to the principle of vestalship. Even a legitimate marriage would be a stain disqualifying him from the celebration of the sacred mysteries. Unconsciously at least, chastity is identified with continence.

In this regard, contemporary thinking has undergone a profound change. Marriage is seen as the union of two persons in love and for life. The corporal

expression of this communion in love no longer needs an apology when faced with the spiritual. Marriage is also seen as the fulfillment of one's personality. Through the couple's mutual duties and needs marriage takes on the aspect of a great school of love which purifies, develops, and unites souls. This religious "justification" of the flesh, supported by modern psychology and anthropology, has made it fashionable to think that without the fulness of corporal experience one can arrive at full maturity only with great difficulty and danger. Mere starvation and throttling of sex can produce dangerous deformations of character. These deformities are well known in cases where the integration of celibacy into the wholeness of personal life has failed.

With this side of the question solely in view, the obligation of celibacy seems to lose its meaning and weight. The objections reduce themselves to a series of questions: What authority can have the right to demand a renunciation that involves such grave consequences? Even if there were individuals who would freely choose this manner of life, could the Church herself impose such a burden on each aspirant to the ministry? Can the needs of an organization deprive man forever of his natural right to develop fully his personality? Can a personality that is retarded and incomplete serve as a true "victim"?

Moreover, people more and more deny to the celibate the full authority to counsel or judge in matters concerning marriage. No one could be competent in these matters unless he exposes himself to the same destiny and assumes its responsibilities. Why can't the priest, like the Protestant pastor, be the model of the father of a Christian family?

Celibacy counterfeited

In brief, the question of celibacy is brought up in the context of this great conflict between the negation and the affirmation of the world. Yet this is exactly the point where the real issue is eluded. For these arguments pivot not on the authentic phenomenon of celibacy but on an unconsciously substituted counterfeit, abstract and negative, as well as on a number of actual failures. The object really to be visualized and discussed is neither an ascetical practice nor a paragraph of Canon Law; it is a real human type, conditioned by celibacy and in turn conditioning celibacy, the concept of a definite and incomparable type, the virginal priest dedicated to Jesus Christ.

It is our purpose in this article to interpret and present this concept. Its principal ideas are: the concept of a <56> consecrated virginity, which reaches its climax in the symbol of the bride, certain images in the Gospels (the watchful servant, the messenger), the concept of angelic man, and above all the marriage between Christ and the Church.

A classic text of the liturgy attributed to St. Leo the Great, the preface for the consecration of virgins, expresses the early Christian attitude to virginity with remarkable depth and clarity.

“To certain souls chosen from among all nations you have given a special gift: While marriage retains its dignity and honor as well as the blessing you bestowed upon it, there are souls who aspire to greater heights, who turn away from the union in the flesh between man and wife. They desire the sacrament of union, but do not imitate what married couples do. Rather they long for that which marriage symbolizes. Thus holy virginity renders praise to its author, aspires after the integrity of the angels, and espouses itself to him who is at once the bridegroom and the son of perpetual virginity.”

States two approaches to love

In detail, the text expresses: (1) a solemn affirmation of the value and dignity of marriage—“the only blessing which we have not lost either through original sin or by the punishment that came with the deluge;” (2) the significance of marriage as a reality greater than itself, as a symbol for something superior; (3) the idea that the reality which marriage prefigures can be reached under the special inspiration of love by another path—virginity. The two ways of love, marriage and virginity, thus appear as two realizations, on different planes, of the same mystery: the sacrament of union.

The first two affirmations coincide with the general idea of marriage found even in pagan cultures as the sacred foundation of the whole human order. But marriage also symbolizes divine realities: the covenant between Yahweh and his people, between Christ and his Church, and between God and each individual. But marriage is only a symbol, and between the image and the reality symbolized lies a wide difference.

Our text says that those who aspire to virginity turn away with distaste (*fastidirent*) from conjugal love. This manner of speaking in today’s world is disconcerting. We can distinguish three types of *fastidium* in this area of sex: The first is a spontaneous, instinctive reaction, in which the soul and the senses recoil from certain aspects of our sexual nature in repugnance and fear. The second type, on the moral level, arises from the universal experience of sex as the source of much suffering, confusion, and pain. Practically often indistinguishable, the two types share the idea that sex is not only filled with enchantment and splendor but also carries a mysterious shadow or stain. This view is not exclusively Christian, monastic, or medieval, but is shared by many a pagan culture, is found in the Bible, and even in the Byzantine liturgy for marriage.

Christian virginity is not based on either the first or second type of attitude to sex. The third kind of *fastidium* from marriage comes from a deep

recognition that even sacramental marriage is imperfect, temporary, perhaps even distracting from the great reality that it symbolizes. This insight leads to the decision to achieve the goal by a shorter route with less use of intermediaries, i.e. by Christian virginity. Obviously there is question here of a “gift given by God to certain souls chosen from among all nations under the sun.”

Christ is model of virginity

Our text only speaks of a virginity with exclusive reference to Christ, for whose love and in whose imitation the gifted soul seeks such a state. One wonders why the Incarnation “by-passed” the use of sex, an area of human life so central and seemingly so inevitable. Yet the Christian knows almost by instinct that the virginity of Christ holds more, <57> not less, of humanness. To share in this perfection of manhood in Christ is the thrust of Christian virginity.

God calls men to represent that which is to come so that these future states may begin even now—to be a kind of eschatological vanguard. Since this essentially means an orientation towards the future, its symbol is that of the bride, the whole dynamism of whose personality is orientated to the future. The Christian is a man in expectation, and the bride personifies this attitude.

Bride no longer autonomous

Most people find it repugnant to use the term bride (and virginity too) when speaking of men. But etymologically the word need not signify something amorous or softly sentimental. The essence is the promise, the contract. The emphasis is on having been irrevocably promised or chosen. The bride may no longer dispose of herself in an arbitrary and autonomous way.

Furthermore, there is only *one* bride of God: the people of God, the Church, the universe, all creation. Every virgin merely represents this whole complexus of reality. This symbolism can be best represented on the existential level by a feminine image, not to be applied to men in too far-stretched manner. The image of the “angelic man” is generally adequate. Insofar as the monk and the priest also represent this attitude of looking forward to the advent of the Lord, the image of the bride applies to them also. But for priests, another eschatological figure is more important: the faithful servant awaiting the return of the Master. Though applicable to every Christian, the image and all the duties it implies are summed up in the priest.

Loins girt, burning lamps held in hand—these images picture one who is vigilant, on guard. In the Gospels, “messengers” are not merely parable figures,

but the disciples who leave all things to follow the Master. The disciple is seen as a man free of all ties.

Another important phrase in our text speaks of virginity as “aspiring to angelic integrity.” To what extent can a man be “like an angel”? Surely, not to the point of having no body. However, integrity also says freedom from any “foreign” element, undisturbed concentration, purity in the sense of absence of confusion and trouble, sanctity in the sense of total consecration to God. Angels are messengers of God in every sense. Many might smile at the wings we still see in old representations; yet they are a marvelous symbol of swift execution of orders, of nimbleness and freedom. For all this the virgin strives.

But isn't this “angelism” —a presumptuous attempt to be “angels in the flesh”? We are a union of the animal and the spiritual, but each component taken separately is not necessarily “contrary to nature.” It is not “contrary” to our human nature to deny one to benefit the other. Most men focus their attention and care on the animal side of man; why should not some people endeavour to emphasize the spiritual?

Even in ancient times some men realized that a continence maintained by the spirit made for greater physical and spiritual strength. Such men could easily be attracted to Christian virginity's aspiration to the angelic level, even as a natural way of life, supernaturally oriented—a way of life that is powerful, ardent, free.

Priest lives spiritual marriage

Above all, the priest represents Christ. Christ is not only he who is to come; he is even now the “spouse” of the Church, united to her in a marriage, the prototype of all Christian marriage (Eph 5:22ff). Priestly celibacy represents the marriage of Christ with the Church.

Thus the priest *lives* a marriage, not in the narrow space of his individual self but on the spiritual level of Christ's marriage with the Church. The essence of marriage is not excluded from his experience; he is not denied all human <58> relations to live solely for a “cause.” Fidelity, gentleness, patience, responsibility, spiritual fatherhood, love are the qualities he must build in himself. Not from mere chance do most people call him “Father.”

Now we can understand why this institution of celibacy took such a long time to evolve into its present form. The idea could develop only as the Church became aware of its relation to Christ, as that image of Christ unfolded before the eyes of faith.

There are in the Church “leaven-words” or “germ-words” which set things in motion, but take a long time to take form and gain a foothold in the awareness of the faithful, e.g. the words of Paul to the Ephesians concerning Christ's marriage with the Church. This mystical idea, which applies to the

individual only as he “repeats” the love between Christ and the Church, took centuries to develop into a theology of “the bride.”

Apostolic notion of authority

During apostolic times there could not yet have existed a notion of a distinct and autonomous sacerdotal ministry. The apostles had recourse to the existing type of authority: the father, the elder, the man who has proved himself, the head of the family. Nor did the medieval defenders of celibacy, like Gregory VII and the Cluniacs, know all the implications of the movements they started. In the evolution of the Church there has often been a “second intention” not always coinciding with the primary intention of the instigator of the movement.

For 1800 years no saint in the history of the Church was able to give his life completely to Christian perfection without cutting himself off, violently at times, from even the most sacred ties of blood. Though this condition has become obsolete, the concept seems to have returned in the psychological claim that a biological experience of sex is necessary. In this new situation celibacy may have to fight for freedom from a tyranny of the spirit more intense than that of the body.

Regarding availability, a *personal* liberty rather than a technical sort of freedom is sought. Some professions, which are exceptionally dangerous—certainly more so than a priest’s, are still compatible with marriage. In such cases no one thinks a woman would divide the heart of a man dedicated to his cause. The point is rather that the man can afford to marry only *one* woman.

Marriage would be unjust

Thus the priest “married” to the Church can not contract a “second” marriage without injustice to the wife and children of his second marriage. The priest who thinks of marrying would put himself into the dilemma of either deliberately choosing tragedy resulting from neglect for his nearest or of curtailing his ministry to fit in with his and their claims of domesticity.

In brief, the celibate priest corresponds to the way the priestly ministry is understood today; he presents the image of the incarnation of priestly work—an authentic image, slowly crystallized after modest beginnings in the words of Scripture and the Gospel images of the virgin, the watchful servant, the father of the family, and the disciple. It is also: founded on practical experience, on the Christian faith in the resurrection, the waiting for the coming of the Lord, the consciousness of our relationship to angels, of our

communion with Christ the Lord and Spouse of the Church. Finally it is based on some forgotten sentiments or experiences not completely reduced to silence from a human wisdom more ancient— coming from the efficacy of a life intact, a life more elevated, approaching that of the gods and the spirit. The first image of the Christian priesthood in apostolic times has been enriched by the influx of new inspirations and attitudes. Through the ages the mixture has produced something far more perfect than the particular forms upon which each new aspect was built. The image of the Catholic priest is one of the most powerful and magnificent forms of manhood which history has ever known. And even if along the way many have fallen short of the ideal, this image has been a thousand times incarnated in an exemplary manner.

Form is basically historical

However, it is a form which is essentially historical, born of a series of events and transformations and not executed according to an abstract initial model. The development of the priestly ministry has fashioned the image of today's priest. The concept of the ministry and the figure of the priest are so indissolubly connected that one cannot change without affecting the other. The image of the Protestant minister did not take form until the concept of the ministry had been decisively transformed and diminished. The marriage of the priest in the Eastern Church corresponds to a stage in our history of the development of ministry.

“Historical” expressly signifies something subject to change. Even our understanding of the priestly ministry is still open to various changes we cannot predict. But any future changes will hardly involve a weakening of this powerful figure of the celibate priest rather than intensification and deepening of this image. As long as the ministry of Christ is essentially made up of current dimensions and perspectives, it will have the form which is proper to it. Is it possible for it to move in a direction other than towards a more total giving? Could it fall back on this side of its possibilities in an effort to limit it for the sake of augmenting the private happiness of those who exercise the office?

In other words: “The ministry cannot be lived except by a special grace (*charismatiquement*),” says Karl Rahner. Those who believe themselves called by God to this ministry have a right to trust in this special grace.

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