

Cause Caelebs

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Caeli beatulus! Graduates of Womersley's recently revived Latin course might recognise this expression as denoting the "happy man of heaven" - though the *Oxford English Dictionary*¹ tamely gives the origin of the English word "celibacy" as the Latin *caelebs*, meaning, uninformatively, "celibacy". Whether compulsory clerical celibacy is a good recipe for producing happy men of heaven, of course, is a moot point. It has always been recognised that such celibacy is an imposed discipline of the Church rather than an indispensable aspect of the ordained ministry;² and, it is alleged, one which is applied inconsistently in the Church today. Is the Church really unfair? And how, then, does St John's Seminary prepare men who are discerning a call to *priesthood*, to engage with *celibacy*?

Challenges to Enforced Celibacy

Outsiders might presume that a seminary is a male bastion in which men being formed for priesthood are kept apart from women and indoctrinated in the superiority of the celibate way. Any such presumption would be very far from the truth, at least when applied to Womersley. Paradoxically, St John's Seminary brings would-be diocesan priests - men on whom celibacy is imposed by the discipline of the Latin Rite - into contact with many counterexamples: clerics, or aspiring clerics, of whom celibacy is not required.

First of all, Womersley is responsible for the formation of an ongoing trickle of former Anglican clergy who seek to continue their ministry in the Catholic Church. Not all of these men are married; but some are; and sometimes these married members of the House will bring their wives or children to seminary functions.

Then there are permanent deacons in training for many of the dioceses in Southern England. These descend on St John's one Sunday each month for their regular formation day. Most of them are married, and many of the wives attend regularly, sharing some of the husbands' lecture courses and having their own "wives' group" sessions. Sunday

1 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition (1989), Clarendon Press, Oxford, vol. II, p. 1020.

2 *Ad Catholici Sacerdoti*, Encyclical of Pius XI, 1935, 40-47; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree of Vatican II, 1965, 16; *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, Encyclical of Paul VI, 1967, 17.

lunch on such days could easily find more such wives than potential priests dining in the Refectory!

Finally, the new academic year began with a new member of staff on the house list. Our new co-ordinator of the Human Development faculty, whose role necessarily includes facilitating the formation and discernment of men embracing celibacy, is a married priest of the Portsmouth Diocese. Taken with the previous points, then, it is clear that those of whom the Church requires celibacy as a condition of priesthood, are confronted at St John's with examples of those who have been admitted to ordination, and even to priesthood, without such an imposition.

Having lived in the House for two and a half years of formation, I can honestly say that I have never heard one word of resentment spoken against those who are exempt, by those who must submit to celibacy. That is not to say that the topic of celibacy is not discussed; on the contrary, the Rector's "Introduction to Priesthood" course in the first year invites new students to consider all the hard issues seriously and freely; and the topic does occur in dinner table conversations from time to time.

The Real Issue

One very common response I get from Catholics when I introduce myself as a seminarian, is "It's a shame you can't get married." Compulsory celibacy is perceived as a denial of human rights to the ordinand, and all the more unfair when contrasted with the situation of the ex-Anglican clergy who seem to be able to have their cake and eat it. It ill behoves the Catholic Church to be a witness to injustice, and yet, at least superficially, it seems that our docile seminarians are accepting an unfair situation. Are we keeping quiet in order not to jeopardise our priestly ordination, rather than speaking out as prophets of justice? Perhaps not - but we need to understand what the *real issues* are around compulsory celibacy.

First of all, we should make the important distinction between *celibacy* and *chastity*. All Christians, without exception, are called to chastity, which means rationing and regulating one's response to sexual desire - especially by respecting the norms of Christian marriage. Confusion is sometimes caused by the fact that celibacy is referred to as "perfect chastity" - this is to be understood in the sense that is the ultimate in self-regulation, and a grace given to *perfect* the human nature of those few God calls to celibacy

for the sake of living out on Earth the state which we will all share in the Kingdom of Heaven.³

I do not have space in this essay to discuss the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church, where married men can be ordained as both deacons and priests.⁴ The reasoning of the Church is that Eastern culture is different, more mystical, and more innately understanding of the Christian mysteries; the pragmatic West needs concrete signs. To avoid inconsistency, and respecting the local culture, Eastern Rite dioceses in the Americas and Australia have been forbidden from ordaining married men.⁵

In both the Eastern and Latin Rites, men ordained to the diaconate - whether as a permanent ministry or *en route* to priesthood - are no longer free to marry. At diaconate, a man is set apart to become an icon of Christ in a way more focused, more sacramental, than the way in which all human beings reflect the image of God.⁶ It is at this point that the Church now judges it fitting to ask an unmarried cleric to live henceforth as an icon of our future life in the Kingdom of God, through celibacy.

Cardinal Stickler has produced a scholarly monograph⁷ which strongly suggests that it is part of the unwritten tradition dating back to apostolic times that married men who were chosen for ministry were required to live in complete continence with their wives from that time onwards; the impossibility of a cleric marrying followed naturally. Today, continence is not asked of married Catholic clergy, but all married men who are chosen for ordination - former Anglicans, permanent deacons,⁸ and Eastern Rite clergy - are obliged to celibacy if they should become widowers.

Any "unfairness" in the West, then, concerns not the diaconate but specifically the priesthood. Married Christian ministers of other traditions who become Catholics can seek priestly ordination while remaining married to the same wife. So the

3 Matthew 19:10-12.

4 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16; *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 17.

5 *Cum Data Fuerit*, Decree of Pius XI, 1929.

6 Joint Introduction to *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* (Congregation for Catholic Education) and *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* (Congregation for the Clergy), 1998, 1.

7 Alfonso Maria Stickler, *The Case for Clerical Celibacy*, Ignatius Press (San Francisco), 1993.

8 *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem, Motu Proprio* of Paul VI, 1967, 16.

real issue is this: in the Latin Rite but **not** in the East, married men brought up in the Catholic faith, but **not** married ministers who convert, are barred from the priesthood but **not** from the diaconate. This seems, *prima facie*, an injustice on the Catholic bachelors of the West who feel a call to both priesthood and marriage.

Deacons vs. Priests

We should find a very positive message in the fact that the Catholic Church readily ordains married men as deacons. A deacon is a clergyman, and a sacrament of the presence of Christ the Head. There is no incompatibility between this role and marriage - though once a married man responds to the call to become such an icon of Christ, he must pledge to live as a more profound symbol of our future heavenly life and of Christ's monogamous faithfulness to the Church, by remaining single should his wife predecease him.

The deacon, therefore, is the proper minister for many liturgical functions where he represents Christ the Head in presidency over the body (congregation).⁹ Yet there are few functions proper to a deacon which a lay person, man or woman, cannot perform in case of necessity. Anyone can baptise¹⁰ in an emergency; a marriage¹¹ can be witnessed by a non-ordained person properly delegated by a bishop; lay people can preside at funeral¹² rites; and even preaching, despite recent Vatican strictures,¹³ can be performed licitly by a lay person skilled in children's ministry during a Mass for children.¹⁴

Does a deacon, then, possess any special power by virtue of his ordination? In canon law, deacons exercise "sacred power" and have certain canonical powers¹⁵ - but this is within a man-made law code. One might argue that a deacon can perform Benediction¹⁶ and certain forms of blessing which a layman cannot; but a blessing by its very nature

9 *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, 21; *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution of Vatican II, 1964, 29.

10 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1256.

11 *Code of Canon Law*, 1112.

12 *In Sure and Certain Hope*, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1999.

13 *On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest*, Congregation for the Laity and eight other dicasteries, 1997, Practical Provisions, Articles 2 & 3.

14 *Directory for Masses with Children*, Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, 1973, 24.

15 *Code of Canon Law*, 89 & 1111.

16 *Code of Canon Law*, 943 & 1168.

is a symbolic action in which the one pronouncing it acts as a representative of God. Those blessings reserved to deacons, then, depend not on a power distinct from the deacon's role as a man set apart as an icon of God, but from the very nature of the diaconate.

Priestly ordination adds to a deacon four powers, or if you like, guarantees that God will provide the inward grace whenever the priest enacts the outward signs, for the sacraments of Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and Confirmation. Any distinction between the priesthood and the diaconate, then, hinges not on whether a man is worthy to be an icon of Christ (a *being* question) but on what sacred powers should be invested in him (more of a *doing* question, perhaps).

One of the ideas stressed in the formation at Wonersh is that men applying for priesthood should freely embrace celibacy for its own sake, and not merely as a means to an end. The logical conclusion, therefore, is not that "priests must be celibate" but that "the power of the priesthood will only be invested in men who have discerned a call to celibacy".

That's a neat little statement, but is it just playing with words? Isn't the reality, as opposed to the ideal, that most priests are celibate out of imposition rather than vocation? Not necessarily.

The men entering formation at Wonersh these days are seldom younger than their mid 20s, and often considerably older. By definition, entrants to formation are single¹⁷ - so, while few of us have already made a conscious and explicit commitment to celibacy, nevertheless by some combination of free choices not to deepen close relationships, and divine providence forestalling opportunities for marriage, there are a goodly number of *de facto* celibates in formation here! Whether we received the Lord's call in childhood or through conversion to the faith, we have found ourselves unmarried when each of us finally succumbed to the nagging and persistent call to try our vocations.

Convert Ministers vs. Catholic Bachelors

At each ordination ceremony, there is a poignant moment when the ordaining bishop will enquire whether the candidate is fit for ordination. The

Rector, or his representative, will solemnly declare that "after enquiry of the people of God, he has been found worthy". It is debatable whether anyone is truly worthy to represent Jesus Christ as His priest, since we all declare that none of us are worthy to receive Him even in the sacrament of Communion; but the point of the ceremony is to attest that the candidate has been tested and at least passed the minimum "*sine qua non*" standard.

One of the unique ministries of the priest is to celebrate the Eucharist, and so make present sacramentally Christ's great act of sacrifice. What kind of man might be deemed "worthy" of exercising such a ministry? A man, perhaps, who has made some great act of sacrifice in his own life. And it may be that this offers us a logic which we can apply within the Latin Rite: no-one is admitted to priestly ordination unless they have demonstrated a capacity for sacrifice.

This is why we should speak of the powers of priesthood being given to those who have freely chosen celibacy, rather than celibacy being imposed on priests. For the former Anglican vicar, sacrifice is amply demonstrated by the trauma of leaving his livelihood and active ministry with no certain guarantee that he can resume it as a Catholic priest, as well as the likely drop in salary and living conditions which follows in both his "resettling period" and his active Catholic ministry.

Why choose these two forms of sacrifice as criteria, and not others, such as the poverty which a successful (and married) businessman might experience on answering God's call? Indeed, can the suffering of the categories be equated? The argument is not watertight; but it does mean that the apparent unfairness presented by the ordination of married former Anglicans is balanced by a respect for the different form of sacrifice they have been called to make.

17 Not only bachelors: Wonersh has taken widowers in my time; and it would not be impossible for a man who had received a marriage annulment to try a priestly vocation.

Conclusion

We must draw these thoughts to some kind of close. Our synthesis is as follows:

1. Celibacy is a calling given to some people - men and women - in order that they may be signs of the Kingdom of God. Any man who becomes ordained has freely chosen to be an icon of Jesus Christ. In so doing, he renounces his freedom to marry, for such an icon must be a sign of the Kingdom *par excellence*.

2. The priesthood, as opposed to the diaconate, invests the man who is an icon of Christ with the powers to confect the Eucharist, bestow the Holy Spirit, and forgive sins.

3. In certain cultures, i.e. Western nations, the nature of the priesthood is poorly understood. In order to give a stronger sign of its deep link with Christ's sacrifice, the powers of the priesthood are only to be invested in men who have demonstrated a personal capacity for sacrifice, either by (at least implicitly) having already embraced celibacy in their lives, or else by renouncing the security of professional ministry in another Christian tradition.

We have not had space here for other related issues: is mandatory celibacy an unwarranted infringement of the human rights of the would-be cleric? Does it send out the wrong signals in a Church trying to promote holy matrimony as a sacred state of life? How does it affect the psychological well-being of priests? None of these are new issues – all were considered by Paul VI in his 1967 encyclical on celibacy.¹⁸

Nevertheless, viewed in the framework above, we can make a good case that the current discipline of the Church on the ordination of married men is not as unfair as it seemed at first sight. We have not shown that it is *necessary* that married men be barred from ordination in the West; and indeed, this topic (unlike the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood¹⁹) is still a legitimate topic for debate, even though Pope John Paul II has made it crystal clear that he has no intention of changing the discipline on his watch. But we might look at the *status quo* in a fresh way, and see that mother Church is not necessarily unjust - and her seminarians are certainly engaging with the issue!

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18 *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 5-11.

19 *Ordination Sacerdotalis*, Apostolic Letter of John Paul II, 1994, 4.