

THE MARRIED PRIEST

By VICTOR DE WAAL

OTHER contributors to this issue have explored the spirituality of the christian priest under many headings and from many different perspectives. My brief in this article is to focus on the single question: what difference does it make to a priest's spirituality if he is married? The task is not to argue the case for or against celibacy — the congruence of the two vocations, to priesthood and to celibacy, has often been stated, and it is clear at the practical level, to say nothing of deeper matters, that the availability of the priest (what the French call *disponibilité*) is greatly enhanced by his remaining unencumbered by wife and family. Did not St Paul himself make the point? 'The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord; but the married about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided' (1 Cor 7,32-33). This very reference, however, already reminds us that Paul is speaking of a missionary situation: his argument does not necessarily apply to the ministry of settled communities. At the time of the Pastoral Epistles the bishops, elders and deacons are clearly expected to be married leaders of the community (1 Tim 3,1-13; Titus 1,5-9). The congruence in a parochial context of the two vocations, to priesthood and to marriage, can be stated with equal force. It may be that the generic term 'priesthood', while referring to a significant and inescapable characteristic of all christian ministry, can also obscure the variety of the gifts in different ministries and their conditions of service (cf 1 Cor 12,4-30; Eph 4,4-16).

If then we set out to explore the interrelation in a man's life between his priesthood and his marriage¹ we begin with the recognition that, in spite of appearances to the contrary and the conflicts which they generate, the two vocations are of different kinds, as are celibacy and priesthood, and have to be worked out one in terms of the other. It is not a matter of compromising between them.

The conflicts appear at every level and present themselves variously and in a different order depending on whether a man is already married when he is ordained (traditionally considered the safer procedure, and still the rule in the eastern Churches) or whether a man already ordained marries later (as frequently happens in anglican and protestant Churches in the case of men ordained young). In the latter case the priest is likely to experience in a more extreme form than hitherto a discord between his spirituality and his sexuality. In

this he is of course the inheritor of that long tradition which regards sex as unclean, and which still underlies popular western culture. And sex is identified with Woman, and Woman with temptation, as the Fathers, like the Rabbis before them, argue in their exegesis of Genesis 3. *Peccatum a mulieribus coepit*, sin begins with women (Ambrose); they are *janua diaboli*, a door of the devil (Tertullian); women are veiled to protect men's virtue (Clement of Alexandria) and the cleric is urged to prayer and vigil against female beauty. In contrast with their progressive emancipation in the hellenistic world, women have no right or duties in the synagogue, and the Church tries repeatedly, though not always successfully to judge by the polemic of successive centuries, to exclude them from leadership in the congregation. It is only by dedicating themselves to virginity, or, second best, to widowhood that they can hope to achieve for themselves that image of God which belongs by right only to men. *Per mulierem stultitia, per virginem sapientia*, by a woman folly, by a virgin wisdom, taught St Ambrose.²

While the repudiation of sexuality is taken to extremes in the heresies, where it becomes part of the baptismal renunciations, the Church continues to affirm marriage; but it fails to resist a double standard, and in the West legislates for its priests (as for example in the Second Lateran Council of 1139), 'It is unworthy for them to be subject to the marriage-bed and to uncleanness'.

Hardly surprising then that a young priest, as, neglecting his customary night prayers, he hops into bed with his bride, feels uneasy about his priestly spirituality. Or that later, when his little children climb delightedly on to his bed in the mornings, he is troubled about how to fit in his morning Office.

Soon for him, as also for the man ordained when already married, another problem presents itself. Wife and Church are rivals. He feels it himself, so does the wife. The new wife feels junior as it were in a polygamous marriage, in which the Church is senior, and if the Church is not jealous of a young supplanter in her husband's affections, the priest himself is torn in his allegiance. Or, for the wife of the already married man, does not his new commitment to the Church feel very like his taking a mistress, and a particularly demanding one at that? Her claims cannot be denied. What is the wife to say when the husband puts on his cassock in order to go to those priestly duties which he 'must' perform? This conflict of course is not confined to the marriage of priests — the firm, the office, the school or college or university, all can make claims on a husband. But the work of a priest is peculiarly all-absorbing and the rivalry is often perceived at a level where a woman may feel her worth and identity put in question; and this of course reflects in turn on the

man's capacity to be both a sufficient husband and a good priest in his own eyes.

The experience of a married priest is that such conflicts call not for compromise, but provide an opportunity to work through to a deeper understanding of both marriage and priesthood — no doubt in parallel to those who are faced with the task of making sense of their priesthood and celibacy. This is why while at one level the comparison between priesthood and other professions and occupations may be helpful, it is misleading here, except in so far as other roles in society exercise some kind of 'priestly' function. And it is interesting to note that it is among just these that the wife is often drawn into her husband's work and is recognized as sharing to a degree in his role. For the classical solution to the apparent conflict of vocations is for the priest's wife to be herself drawn into an ever deeper participation in her husband's priesthood. In the orthodox Churches it is not uncommon for her to be called 'Mother'; and a recent study among the same anglican ordinands and their wives, before the man's ordination and a few years after, indicates that even when the couple declare unequivocally that the wife will lead her own life without assisting in her husband's work, she almost invariably (and without quite realizing it) comes in fact to share his ministry, though she may also be exercising her own profession as well.³

Nor should this be surprising if we reflect that marriage is not in fact merely a concession to the flesh in a pejorative sense, but the development of a unifying human relationship of 'one flesh' from which nothing can in principle be excluded. And this demands its own ascesis. Mary Anne Oliver writes:

The task of the early years can be seen as twofold: renunciation on the one hand, to 'leave father and mother', and on the other, the interpersonal discipline of building the one body, the unity if not of opposites, at least of differences. The first renunciation is familiar to spiritual theology, though its embodiment in conjugal life has largely passed unnoticed. . . . Entrance into the conjugal life involves willingness to give up anything or anybody standing in the way of union, past, present, or future. It may require, for example, giving up name, self-sufficiency, freedom of movement, old friendships, personal creativity, wider social participation, or leisure. It necessarily entails twenty-four-hour-a-day accountability for the rest of your life, and drastically reduced if not totally eliminated privacy. Penelope Washbourne speaks movingly of 'the all-pervading, ever-seeing presence of the other . . . (as) a mirror of unmasking'. Every element of personality is revealed. All appearances to the contrary, real renunciation is required in the married state.⁴

The complementarity of male and female in the one image of God in humanity is present and has to be worked out in the married and unmarried state alike, in our own psyche and in our relationships, and in a post-freudian age we recognize that man's fear of woman and of his own sexuality in consequence (so profound in our culture) is a function of the failure to come to terms with the feminine and instinctive in himself. Here the married priest has the advantage that, being married to a laywoman, he can learn from her something of the feminine way of prayer and of understanding God. But of course that complementarity is not limited to the married and has shown itself delightfully and creatively in the lives of many faithful celibates, both men and women, as the lives of Jesus himself and the saints testify, and is to be found today, for example, in the freshness of double or parallel religious communities of men and women. And most obviously it is to be found in the sexual intimacy of marriage in which sex is not so much tamed or even contained (as an earlier grudging acceptance of marriage taught), for it is the life force itself, but humanized. It becomes one and that a chief element in that 'third language' learned by two people in order that they may construct a new reality. It is to this end that all sexual intercourse for all its human inadequacy points. In marriage its ritual nature (which can, like all ritual, descend into routine) is the focus of a shared life in all its kaleidoscopic riches — joyful, sorrowful and humdrum.

The experimental risk of two adults, bringing to one another separate identities and inheritances, together with the total invasion of children, is an act of faith demanding a readiness to confront every fantasy and a joint and mutual obedience to reality. Thus a marriage and family become, in St Benedict's phrase, 'a school of the Lord's service', a school of love in which to learn the discipline of spouse and father, roles that for a priest are then grounded experimentally and become more than metaphor in his ministry. The temptation is to hold something back. Especially for a priest it is easy to confuse the keeping of an innermost silence and space for God with the temptation to an inner withdrawal, retiring into a shell to protect himself from the noisy demands of his family, of domestic worries and material possessions. The need is to centre on the body, not to let these apparent distractions, the confusing expectations and the conflicting demands become obstacles, but ways of being available and vulnerable to God, ready to be found by him.

The testing discipline of reality is a condition of self-understanding and, in the process, religious fantasy, so easily unrecognized in our prayer, is stripped away. A devout young man offers himself to God, and the offer is meant genuinely and felt to be so: the act of will is moved and coloured by a strong erotic element, perhaps unacknow-

ledged. It is not till that self-oblation is tested by the reality of forsaking all, of losing his life in order to find it, that he comes face to face with the severity of Christ's demand and the actual meaning of his prayer. That may happen in the context of the commitment to celibacy in particular or the religious life in general. It will happen too in the context of marriage, where also the real difficulty is that of loving and accepting the love of other people. In the case of the celibate the process of the transformation of love may be a gradual one, but a man who marries may well find that the erotic element in his prayer seems to vanish suddenly. He is left apparently impotent in his relationship to God, the moment that his love is naturally transferred to his bride. Especially if the erotic element has been unrecognized, this can be a disorientating experience, giving rise to a sense of betrayal.

The transformation of love means no denial of eros. It is surely misleading to categorize the various kinds of love as if they were mutually exclusive, for the love of God himself is characterized by a passionate energy that informs our sufferings and our celebrations with a power to which our ordinary loving is a clue. It was said of the monastic communities of the Egyptian desert that they were an image and foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. So also marriage embodies the mystery of the relationship of Yahweh and Israel, of Christ and his Church; and is not the wedding feast the paradigm of the messianic age? The best-known icon of the Holy Trinity is of the converse of Abraham and his visitors, seated at table, in a mutuality of love into which the worshipper is invited to respond with a like openness of heart and mind. This is a relationship which David Jenkins (in an unpublished lecture) has summarized as, 'My being me will enable you to be you; you me; and not me without you', a relationship of perfect identity and perfect freedom, which subsisting in the Godhead issues in that communication between persons, and that communion of them, which underlies all true community.

Those persons and that community, in their contingency, are images of the Godhead, Trinity in Unity — mere icons, true icons. God is transcendent but not remote, present in his likeness in the self, in that other person, in that community of persons. And so he meets and addresses the married priest not only in the wider society of the Church, intended as a sign of the kingdom, but also immediately in the sacrament of his marriage. God finds him there, finds him out there, father of these children, married to this woman. And so he learns that the role of priesthood in which he has been cast cannot be a matter of playing a part, unless he remains content to be as it were a 'ham' actor, embarrassingly less than himself.

His priesthood will demand of him a progressive entering as

deeply as may be into his own humanity in order to discover in himself, in the imitation of Christ, that representative manhood which makes him available to and on behalf of others. 'It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure' (1 Jn 3,2-3).

It is in this light that Peter Brook writes about the actor, reflecting on the polish director Jerzy Grotowski's vision of the theatre as a sacred activity, in which the actor exercises a form of 'priesthood' and finds a possibility of salvation for himself.

He needs to call on every aspect of himself. His hand, his eye, his ear, and his heart are what he is studying and what he is studying with. Seen this way (it) is a life's work — (He) is step by step extending his knowledge of himself. (He) allows (his) role to 'penetrate' him; at first he is all obstacle to it, but by constant work he acquires technical mastery over his physical and psychic means by which he can allow the barriers to drop. 'Autopenetration' by the role is related to exposure: (He) does not hesitate to show himself exactly as he is, for he realizes that the secret of the role demands his opening himself up, disclosing his own secrets. So his (work) is an act of sacrifice, of sacrificing what most men prefer to hide — this sacrifice is his gift. It is obvious that not everyone is called to priesthood and no traditional religion expects this of all men. There are laymen — who have necessary roles in life — and those who take on other burdens for the laymen's sake. The priest performs the ritual for himself and on behalf of others. (He) lays bare what lies in every man — and what daily life covers up.⁵

This is priesthood in a profounder sense than most recent theology has understood it. I think, therefore, that it is legitimate to reverse the analogy and to seek to understand the nature of priesthood in terms of what is here said about the actor, all the more because Peter Brook discerns the theatre as having a holy purpose, responding to a need in the community which he believes the Churches no longer fill.

It is striking that the life work of the actor in extending his knowledge of himself in every aspect — his hand, his eye, his ear, and his heart — acquiring technical mastery over his physical and psychic means, is seen not as that conflict (so familiar to the clergy) of defending a 'real self' against the threat of an imposed role, but as one in which we have to master ourselves so that the role can penetrate us. Yet this self-mastery does not involve a constricting of our humanity, but an exploration of it to its fullest extent and potential. There is a confidence here that any particular role need not be a false mask, a façade, but can be the means of self-discovery and self-

acceptance, and a genuine agent in the interplay of human beings in society. Through the roles he himself undertakes to act the actor enters so deeply into human nature that he can be all things to all men, and this means dropping all his own barriers. And so in the full interpenetration of himself and his role he is not afraid 'to show himself exactly as he is, for he realizes that the secret of the role demands his opening himself up, disclosing his own secrets. So his work is an act of sacrifice, of sacrificing what most men prefer to hide — this sacrifice is his gift'. In this, as Peter Brook writes of the priest taking on burdens for the sake of others, 'performing the ritual for himself and on behalf of others', the ritual of 'laying bare what lies in every man — and what daily life covers up', he is close to a commentary on the Christ of whom we read that 'he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man' (Jn 2,25), and in whom we believe God to have taken humanity into himself.

For those called to share in that priesthood marriage is one way towards this self-discovery.

NOTES

¹ For the purpose of this article, I am assuming a male priesthood. The implication of marriage for a woman priest, if the possibility of the ordination of women be granted, would properly have to be explored by a woman.

² Cf article 'Frau' by K. Thraede, *passim*, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*.

³ See the work of Dr Janet Spedding of Lancaster University, 'Clergy wives: a sociology of conformity', an unpublished thesis for Bradford University, U.K.

⁴ M. A. M. Oliver: 'Comparative spirituality: conjugal and monastic' (unpublished). The quotation from Penelope Washbourne is from her *Becoming woman: quest for wholeness in female experience* (New York, 1970), p 187.

⁵ Peter Brook: *The empty space* (London, 1972), pp 66-67.

