CELIBACY AND CLERICAL CULTURE

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. . . for the manner of thy begetting is so foule that the name, nay the lightest thought of it, defileth the purest minde, so that our B. Sauiour refused none of our miseries, but onely that; and the matter so horrid, so foule, that all other dung is pleasant and gratefull in respect of it; nay we dare not in discourse giue it a name, for our owne shame & others offence . . .

I cannot imagine any prison so darke, so straight, so loathsome, as the wombe of a woman, in Which the child is inclosed, & enwrapped in most foule, bloudy and matterous skinnes or membranes, for no lesse, then nine whole moneths; so straighned and pressed, that neither hand nor foot can he stirre or moue: his food, the filthy menstrous bloud of his mother, a thing so nasty, and poisonous, as that what soeuer it toucheth, it infecteth, like the plague or lepry . . .[1]

THIS DISTURBING EXPRESSION of disgust with human conception and women's bodies is to be found in a late-seventeenth-century collection of meditations for English Roman Catholic seminarians. The language is historically conditioned but there can be no doubt that negative attitudes to women, sex and the human body have had a long and damaging effect on the formation of celibate Roman Catholic clergy. The law of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church, however, signals more than attitudes to sex and marriage in isolation. It concerns the defence of the boundaries that underpin its version of clerical culture. This essay, therefore, examines celibate culture as the wider context within which to understand important aspects of traditional attitudes to celibacy.[2]

An *option* for celibacy is undoubtedly part of particular calls to work for the kingdom of God. There are many healthy celibates and there are contexts where celibate ministry makes special sense. However, its mandatory nature undermines a spirituality of charism and submerges the option for *anyone* under the weight of historical, theological and psychological baggage. What we confront is a crisis of meaning for an ecclesiastical *culture* that has depended on a complexity of symbols and on an ideology of separation and superiority. I use 'culture' in the sense generally accepted in organizational science. In this case it implies an interrelated set of attitudes, values and ways of behaving that are specific

to a male clerical world rather than to celibates *per se*. These both govern the life-style of ordained leaders and constitute a framework that affects all elements of the Church's life and mission including attitudes to, and the self-understanding of women. Celibate culture encompasses a total world-view.[3]

The contemporary crisis of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church goes to the heart of our understanding of both Christian identity and the Church. Given lurid media coverage of breakdowns in celibate life, there can be few people who are unaware of a crisis but the claim that it is a matter of Christian identity seems a large one. However, celibacy is a *social* reality for sexuality involves our ways of seeing and acting.[4] Mandatory priestly celibacy inevitably embodies a definitive view of the *saeculum*, 'the here and now', and of the inferiority of a settled, domestic life.

Traditional celibate culture involves presuppositions and biases (for example, male dominance, the superiority of clerical ways of thinking and the importance of separation from materiality and bodiliness) that together encourage circular reasoning about what is important in human existence. Such reasoning is a tendency in all human organizations – most sharply expressed when under threat. However, the prolonged lifespan of celibate culture, reinforced by powerful religious language, encourages an assumption that it is 'the way things are' or even that it is of archetypal significance rather than contingent. Consequently, there is an intimate connection between celibate culture and institutional thinking. Humans inevitably create institutions but the collective inertia of 'institutional thinking' views their preservation as an end in itself. Thus, we think only within certain categories and conceive reality in a lopsided way.

The institutional response to crisis tends to be a strong reaffirmation of traditional values and practices irrespective of changed reality. The deeper challenges are thus not addressed. For example, we fail to ask *how* traditional clerical culture really continues to serve the gospel. We are also unlikely to examine *positive* changes that helped to provoke the crisis – for example, new understandings of sexuality and of male–female relationships.

Celibate culture as historically contingent

The fact of change reminds us that we need a historical perspective within which to analyse celibate culture. Another essay examines the complex historical development of celibacy so I propose merely to summarize a few salient points.

Firstly, Western celibate culture originates partly in attitudes inherited from the late Roman Empire. Here, the struggle to remain 'virile' eliminated all softness that might lead to effeminacy.[5] Detachment and self-sufficiency were the hallmarks of the true man. This later received powerful reinforcement from such medieval theologians as Jean Gerson who accused women of being determined seducers threatening male autonomy.[6]

Ambrose, the fourth-century Bishop of Milan, explored male detachment in explicitly Christian terms by linking it to the virtue of integrity. This involved two things. Firstly, one should maintain *boundaries*. 'To surrender any boundary line was to court the ancient shame of the Roman male – it was to "become soft", to be "effeminated".'[7] Secondly, it was 'the precious ability to keep what was one's own untarnished by alien intrusion'.[8] For Ambrose, virginity perfectly expressed integrity because it guaranteed a body and soul kept whole and entire. Significantly, integrity was a *male* virtue partly, one supposes, because women's *physical* integrity was consistently marred by their menstrual cycle.

'Integrity' later coalesced with the medieval fear of fragmentation and belief 'that wholeness – non-partibility and non-passibility – is God's ultimate promise to humankind'. Wholeness is crucial to salvation.[9] Thinkers like Roger Bacon suggested that people should prepare for the eternal integrity of bodily resurrection by striving for moral and physical intactness in the present.[10]

Secondly, human non-passibility related to the way that God was increasingly seen, after the Patristic period, as radically impassible. Among other influences, a pervasive late-Roman Stoic philosophy replaced the more scriptural image of a God of desire with a God distanced from the uncertainties of passion.[11] This suggested a new goal for Christian leadership – priesthood 'in the image of a passionless God'. Through such detachment the priest reveals God. It is also possible to see elements of the Roman *paterfamilias*, who owned his family and gave them identity, playing a role in the development of celibate leadership. 'The celibate leader becomes spiritual *paterfamilias*, continuing the tradition of masculine domination and distance.'[12]

Thirdly, there was a gradual separation of clergy from the *laos*. There were three crucial phases of this movement: the period of liturgical changes from the ninth century onward, the papal-inspired 'Gregorian' reforms of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and, finally, the creation of seminaries after the Reformation. Together these reforms separated the clergy physically, architecturally, socially and, ultimately, spiritually from ordinary mortals.

In the early phase, the choirs and cloisters of church and monastery became an 'enclosure' with restricted access. In church, screens began to separate the nave from a chancel reserved to clergy who celebrated an increasingly hieratic liturgy. The eucharist wafers were no longer to be 'ordinary' bread, as if the eucharist was now foreign to everyday life. In the second phase, a legitimate desire to free the Church from excessive control by secular lords also led to an enhancement of clerical status and the 'clericalization' of official religious functions. In the aftermath of the Reformation rejection of celibacy, the creation of semi-monastic seminaries to train Catholic clergy helped to ensure the secure enforcement of celibacy. Medieval law had *de facto* not applied universally (for example in Iceland) and was not always observed even where it was theoretically enforced. Seminaries, from the late sixteenth century to the 1960s (laced with a dose of Jansenistic puritanism on the way), also deliberately set out to inculcate in students the attitudes and behaviour patterns of a spirituality of separation, of a priestly caste spiritually superior to the laity and to the married 'ministers' of the Churches of the Reformation.

The changes in liturgy after Vatican II can be seen, at least in part, as a breakdown of these centuries-old symbols of a self-contained clerical culture. It is inevitable that the culture which they defined has become increasingly vulnerable. In a sense, Archbishop Lefèbvre discerned correctly when he objected that liturgical reform implied a great deal more.[13]

Celibate culture in crisis

To return to the present, it seems, whether we like it or not, that the rationale for mandatory celibacy no longer convinces a majority in the Church — at least in the western culture with which I am most familiar. However, this is part of a wider change of values. Traditional Catholic culture associated celibacy with the heroic asceticism of clergy whose ecclesial and social status was largely unquestioned. There was a positive desire for sons and daughters to enter seminaries and convents. Increasingly, this social support for celibacy and its associated clerical culture is disappearing.

Equally disturbing is the fact that the traditional emphasis on celibacy as *the* ascetical ideal no longer engages many clergy and religious themselves. Many priests, including religious, now admit that their calling was essentially to ministry and that, at a certain age, they simply accepted without question the life-style that once seemed the only possibility. While the flood of departures has decreased there remains a

significant leakage and a serious decline in candidates. Mandatory celibacy is, in one sense, only one factor. However, because celibacy was the most powerful boundary of a culture of separation, its crisis is powerfully symbolic of the overall decline of traditional male clericalism.

Many assumptions that supported celibate culture have been abandoned. For example, the powerful assertion in the Vatican II documents concerning a single *baptismal* call to holiness and mission has gradually undermined the hierarchy of spiritualities and Christian life-styles in the Church. There has also been a shift in the understanding of sexuality and marriage and their social significance. Taken together, these factors mean that many priests find that struggles to maintain the traditional clerical way of life in a spiritually unsupportive environment are a distraction from ministry. So much energy is channelled into mere survival.

Several recent reports have drawn attention to a breakdown of the old culture of celibacy. Although there have been reservations about some of the methods of research and their statistical reliability, the findings, broadly speaking, came as no surprise to those who work pastorally with clergy and religious.[14] The 1990 Roman Synod unambiguously reaffirmed universal clerical celibacy in the West and suggested that it 'shone out' with new clarity. Yet discerning bishops knew otherwise – that celibacy, as presently structured, is no longer an intelligible ideal to many and also that many priests, in some cases with the knowledge of their bishops, make painful compromises in order to remain faithful to their basic call to ministry. Formerly the natural heart of a complete ascetical system, mandatory clerical celibacy is now a traditional behaviour pattern in search of a rationale. Once the social and spiritual underpinnings for the practice are eroded, it cannot be artificially reconstructed. A new rationale, free from the taint of bankrupt ideas, may only emerge some way into the future.

Is the problem that, as some Church leaders suggest, modern society is selfish and *incapable* of appreciating celibacy? There is little evidence that committed young Christians are more spoilt and less heroic than in the past. Rather they are nowadays confronted with competing options for their gospel zeal. Is modern society fixated on sex? Sometimes the media give that impression but many parents would say that their children have a much healthier and less guilt-ridden attitude to sex than they had at the same age. Celibate clerical culture, in defensive mode, tends to caricature its social surroundings as unbridled sensualism. Criticisms by senior clergy seem unbalanced when they give the

impression that any positive evaluation of sex as a spiritual experience or a serious way to God must be unhealthy.

Celibate culture faces an apparent contradiction. Having developed a more positive theology of marriage in recent years, how do we avoid implying, by *mandatory* celibacy, that committed relationships are still second-class ways of serving God? The 1990 Roman Synod stated that celibacy consecrated priests in 'an intimate union with Christ the bridegroom, who so loved his bride, the Church, that he gave up his life for her'. This was perceived by many thoughtful married people as denigrating their own lives for it is in these same terms that the *married* state has often been described since Vatican II. Equally, the use of a marriage metaphor to describe the relationship of a priest to Jesus or to the Church is deceptive and even destructive.

The crisis of celibate culture today is partly related to *positive* changes in attitudes concerning male–female relations and relatedness in general. The superstructure of celibate culture was built on the premise that human intimacy distracted our attention from God. However, in mature consciousness, sexuality-interpreted-as-lust has been replaced by sexuality-as-relatedness. Thus, those who suggest that issues of celibacy are merely 'hormone problems' ignore the fact that the positive values of *relatedness* and *collaboration* are increasingly described as at the heart of sexuality.

There is also a crisis of 'the masculine' linked to shifts in gender roles, an erosion of a patriarchal understanding of the family and serious questions about our one-sided imaging of God and the 'world of the Spirit'. Sexuality is no longer interpreted in terms of purely male experience so women should not be seen as *objects* of male desire and, by extension, as dangers to male integrity. A view of sexuality that focused on the naturally lustful male plagued by the need to relieve sexual tensions encouraged an over-emphasis on the awful (awesome?) male libido. There is now a quite different understanding of sexual expression at the service of equal human relationships. Desire and pleasure are increasingly seen as having spiritual potential rather than as threats to higher ideals.[15] The partial connection between the origins of Christian teaching on virginity and Stoic philosophy led to the spiritual significance of a repudiation of pleasure.[16]

The values of relatedness and collaboration are also increasingly experienced as central to the nature of the Church and its message. They offer the possibility of a healthier theory and practice of leadership, authority and ministry. In summary, human sexual needs have been transformed both in the way they are understood and in terms of the

wider context within which they come to consciousness. A change in attitude to celibacy is vital to bring to fruition a renewed vision of the Church and how it addresses the world. Celibate culture is caught up with issues of ecclesiology and of evangelization.

Celibate culture and power

The connection between sexuality and ways of relating inevitably means that celibate culture involves questions of power. Sexual abstinence, from a male perspective, is associated with retaining essential powers. This is a psycho-spiritual as well as a physical matter. It is deeply rooted in the history of the clerical psyche not to come too close to women lest one be infected by their emotionality. Equally, female sexuality was perceived as related to natural powers (giving birth, for example) that were mysterious, uncontrollable and profoundly threatening.

The great fear was loss of self-possession and celibate culture has tended to gather every significant element of Church life under its control. Thus, those who belonged within the culture were empowered and those outside disempowered. As in all dominant power groups, the control of membership is crucial. Celibacy, in the limited sense of being unmarried, has long been a condition and proof of membership of a clerical class. It guaranteed, too, that the powers and possessions of clerical culture were not dissipated in a network of external relationships and in provision for heirs.

Clericalism tends to protect its power bases. Opposition to change often masks a fear of dispossession. Sometimes this defensiveness is expressed by the subtle, if unconscious, denigration of other life-styles. Thus, celibates can still sometimes be heard to say of those who finally choose marriage over ordination that 'it was a pity that his talents were wasted'. Occasionally, celibates' careless language indicates a continued belief that their life-style is the closest to gospel values.

On both sides of the Atlantic there seems to be far less *practical* interest by clergy in the role of lay Christians than there was ten years ago. Rather, they are preoccupied with *clerical* identity and defensive when challenged by lay Christians. At a time of declining numbers and low morale, invitations to the clergy to adopt a more collaborative mentality appear as another threat to a beleaguered species who feel the loss of their 'vocational priority'.

The complex link between celibacy and power is part of the reason why, despite changes in theory since Vatican II, the institution of the Church still finds the actual empowerment of all its members difficult.

For to empower *all* involves shedding power by the few who traditionally exercised it exclusively. This touches not only on who has a public ministry or access to theological education. It also relates to the continued absence of married experience among established decision-makers. The dominance of celibate, clerical thinking in the Church, closely associated with a spirituality of separation, makes hierarchical assumptions more likely, gives rise to a widespread suspicion of 'the world', underpins a desire to preserve the Church from dilution and breeds a more exclusive view of the sacraments and who may approach them.

Finally, we need to look sensitively and fearlessly at the causes and implications of the increasing number of cases of sexual abuse by celibate males, recently exposed most dramatically in North America and in England. Regarding sexual abuse in general, recent studies indicate that power over another human being lies at the heart of most documented abuse cases.[17] Thus, sexual violation seems to be used to meet a number of needs that have little to do with desire let alone love. Indeed, some clergy who abuse seem quite unable to form intimate, *equal* relationships.

A report on child abuse by Roman Catholic clergy, recently presented to the Canadian bishops, courageously looked beyond sexual disorder to signs of institutional pathology in clerical culture. It suggested, among other things, that traditional clerical status gave priests 'excessive power' which was 'unchecked by any kind of social control'. Their isolated position made them incapable of 'developing healthy relationships built on simple friendship – something essential to a balanced humanity'.[18]

Sexual abuse is about *using* other people and dominating them. It exists in churches where there is no mandatory celibacy but raises similar questions about the power associations of all forms of clerical culture. But mandatory celibacy does serve to heighten power issues. A profoundly disturbing question is whether, at a deep level, there are connections with other forms of power abuse in the Church and with patriarchal structures.[19] There are also uncomfortable questions about the unacknowledged motives of *anyone* entering into 'the power' of ordained ministry and its surrounding culture.

As I have noted elsewhere, clerical formation educated most priests out of the ability to be receivers.[20] This affects all dimensions of ministry and life-style. Clerical life has for so long been structured in terms of *providing*, with ordination conferring a power that others need, that it is difficult for power to be given away.

Separations and relations

Celibate culture does not easily accommodate intimacy for this implies some loss by moving out of self. As a married friend jokingly said to me, 'the trouble with other people is that they attach us securely to *this* world!' More graphically, she described sexual relations and child-rearing as 'messy, sticky and smelly!'

Celibate culture has been uncomfortable with the messiness of this-worldly relationships of all kinds. It has sought to avoid commitment to the *particular* in all its forms, whether person or place. It inculcates detachment as a central value. Clergy have been taught that the universal is more perfect, that freedom of movement is more valuable than particular, stable commitments to people. Ultimately, celibates belong to 'the clergy', 'the Order' or, more broadly, 'the Church' rather than to people or place. They are expected to pick up their bags and go with little consideration not only for their own roots but even less for the commitments that bind others to them. This attitude tends to drive the Church away from history towards timelessness and the myth of a *societas perfecta* – self-contained and complete. The avoidance of relatedness also reinforces a denial of 'the self'. Some surveys of clergy attitudes reveal a frightening lack of ego-development.[21]

Another way of understanding a spirituality of detachment and separation is to understand that if celibacy, in a male perspective, preserves bodily integrity this relates to a search for *reliability*. Because of its eschatological dimension, Christian spirituality has frequently been tempted to escape from what is perceived as unreliable. Because the flesh and human intimacy are affected by decay and uncertainty they are patently not reliable.

Celibate culture images the Church as 'sacred space' and, because everything sacred belongs to eternity, what is connected with the Church must be characterized by imperishability. The supposed superi-ority of a celibate clergy lies partly in the fact that they are perceived as uniquely able to represent this understanding of the Church. Images of the impassible, predictable God safely removes the sacred from all that is impermanent. How difficult, then, to seek and find God in the pro-visionality of human relationships. The celibate *male* priest, it may be thought, more easily images a God untouched by the vagaries of ordinary human existence. This is why it is difficult to question traditional celibate culture without also facing the issue of an exclusively male priesthood and the background question of representing God solely by male imagery in prayer and worship.

Conclusion

The crisis of celibacy should not be linked simplistically to supposed psycho-sexual problems in contemporary society. Many people now realize that it is traditional clerical *culture* that is at issue. This easily became like a men's club, the masonic lodge or the officers' mess – safe environments where men can 'be themselves' without outside interference. If celibacy is to survive as a viable and accepted option it must be detached from the historically conditioned contexts within which it has existed for so long.

While the present crisis continues to be interpreted merely as a problem of clerical numbers rather than a question of meaning we are unlikely to make a significant response. Clerical culture does not need a new image or purely incremental adjustment so much as a profound change of reality. For this to happen there has to be some attempt to move towards what the social sciences call a *paradigm shift* – a revolutionary change of world-view. Sadly, deeply entrenched cultures under threat instinctively retreat into silence and fear and tend to give responsibility to good managers rather than to *leaders*. The first can only make adjustments, the second are those capable of moving people and institutions forward to a radically enriched vision. This demands an ability to challenge dominant cultural assumptions as a prelude to dreaming new dreams. For this, there is needed something of the innocent yet knowing freedom of the child in Hans Christian Andersen's tale who could proclaim that, despite the conspiracy of silence, the Emperor actually had no clothes.[22]

NOTES

[1] *Meditations Collected and Ordered for the Use of the English College of Lisbo By the Superiors of the Same College*, The Second Edition (Douai: Baltazar Bellere, 1663), from the First Part, 'Meditations for Beginners or for the Purgatiue way' The First Chapter, The First Meditation ('What man is according to his body'), pp 2–3. I am grateful to Peter Harris of Allen Hall, London for this reference.

[2] Other Western clerical cultures, the Reformed and Anglican have of course had married clergy for the last 400 years – although some people would argue that the Elizabethan Settlement in England merely permitted (and reluctantly) clerical marriage while retaining an essentially celibate model for Anglican priesthood thus setting up some still unresolved tensions! The complex experiences of these traditions are clearly important for any broader understanding of how clerical cultures function but here I must, reluctantly, confine myself to the particular connections between celibacy and clericalism.

[3] I am particularly grateful for the comments of Catherine Ryan OSM who is involved in a research project on the organizational analysis and behaviour of religious groups.

[4] For an immensely scholarly and compelling analysis of the social, as well as theological, meaning of celibacy in the early Church, see Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (New York, 1988/London, 1989).

5 See Brown, *op.cit.*, p 11.

6 The whole of Brown, Chapter 1 concerns classical Roman attitudes to masculinity and to relations with women. On Gerson, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as mother: studies in the spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), pp 135–36. For some other classic examples of medieval male celibate's fear of women, see R. W. Southern, *Western society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London, 1970), pp 314–15.

7 Brown, p 347 and reference to Ambrose's *de officiis* in n. 30.

8 Thus Brown summarizes Ambrose's understanding of integrity, p 354.

9 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption: essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York, 1991), p 12.

10 Cited in Bynum, *Fragmentation*, p 269.

11 On the influence of Stoic philosophy on the early Church, see Brown, *Body and society*, chapter 1 and pp 128–30.

12 James and Evelyn Whitehead, 'Re-imaging the masculine' in *The Way* (April 1992), p 121.

13 I am grateful to Fr Kevin Kelly of the Archdiocese of Liverpool for his helpful comments on my historical synopsis.

14 For example, see Richard Sipe, *A secret world: sexuality and the search for celibacy* (New York, 1990) and the interesting review article by Dr Jack Dominian in *The Tablet* weekly, 19 January 1991. Dr Sipe is lecturer in psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, a Roman Catholic and former Benedictine. He has reflected further on his findings in two articles in *The Tablet:* 'Sex and celibacy', 9 May 1992 and 'Double-talk on celibacy', 16 May 1992.

15 See, for example, Joan Timmerman, *Sexuality and spiritual growth* (New York, 1992).

16 See Brown, *op. cit.*, chapter 1 and Jacques Le Goff, *The medieval imagination* (ET Chicago, 1988), pp 93–103, 'The repudiation of pleasure'.

17 See, for example, Stephen Rossetti (ed), *Slayer of the soul: child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church* (Mystic, Connecticut, 1990) – especially the section on different psychological theories of abuse.

18 See, *From pain to hope.* The report of the Canadian Roman Catholic Bishops' committee on child sexual abuse was presented in June 1992. Quotation cited in Michael Higgins, 'Focus on sexual abuse', *The Tablet,* 13 February 1993, p 194.

19 The original report on Church sexual abuse scandals in Newfoundland noted that 'many have argued that patriarchal thinking is one of the contributing factors to the sexual abuse of children' and also that witnesses had commented that 'paternalism and sexism are very much in evidence . . . among both young and old priests in the Archdiocese'. Quoted in Higgins, *The Tablet*, p 196.

20 See, 'Spirituality and sexism', especially pp 93–6 in Richard Holloway (ed), *Who needs feminism?* (London, 1991).

21 See, for example, Gerard Burke, 'The contemporary priest: experience and identity' in *The Way Supplement,* 56 (Summer 1986), pp 124–36.

22 Apart from people already cited, I am grateful to Kathleen Donnelly, John Goodall, Susan Hayward and Jackie Hawkins for their helpful comments on the text of this article.