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It is the sacred conviction of the Church that a faith of extraordinary measure is at the disposal of all those upon whom a bishop has laid his consecrating hands.

Man of one wife or celibacy

By Stanley L. Jaki

■ Innuendos about priestly celibacy have long since been a favorite pastime of novelists and journalists. Most of them just want to cash in on the insatiable craving for ever fresh titillation. They also see, and rightly so, in priestly celibacy the concrete source of the much resented intransigency of the Catholic Church. Her hierarchical celibate priesthood alone holds uncompromising standards in a field, sexual ethics, where her strictures cut in flesh and blood far more sharply than in any other area of her teaching. Relatively few are the literary and journalistic probings into priestly celibacy which are not so much hostile or resentful in tone as are sadly confused in perception. Hence their special instructiveness.

A case in point is a one-page story (p. 43) in the February 24 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* as its weekly feature ABOUT MAN. The man in question is

“Father Frank,” already twenty years in the priesthood. The drama of his story stems from his feeling that the only and rather limited experience of fatherhood open to a celibate priest is to guide a young man into the seminary and obtain in him, through ordination, a spiritual son. To be sure, Father Frank has not lost the admiring friendship of Mr. Anthony DePalma, author of the story and a regular contributor to the *New York Times* on real estate, although, contrary to Father Frank’s hopes, he chose not to be a priest. Father Frank was duly invited to baptize the newly born Laura Felice DePalma. The ceremony was not an occasion of unmixed happiness for the baby’s father. Was he not unnecessarily bringing Father Frank face to face with his celibate inability to have full fatherhood?

Such is in brief a story in which Father Frank is described in the best characteristics—simple, honest, hard-working and

humane in the highest degree — that make him, in Mr. DePalma's eyes, the very opposite of almost all priests. But the real failure of this patently unbalanced character-dynamics is Mr. DePalma's description of Father Frank as a man of "extraordinary faith." A telltale remark, especially so because of the huge caption, NOT TO BE A PRIEST, which runs across the center of the page under an evocative color picture showing the sad face of a man in Roman collar over a baby's face.

Fruit of extraordinary faith

Journalists, and indeed those whose freelancing is acceptable to most newspapers, weeklies and monthlies, still have to learn two important points about priestly celibacy: Not only does the Church hold celibacy to be the fruit of extraordinary faith, but it is also the sacred conviction of the Church that a faith of extraordinary measure is at the disposal of all those upon whom a bishop laid his consecrating hands. They should only remind themselves of Paul's precepts to Timothy: "Liven up the charism which is in you through the imposition of my hands on you" (2 Tim. 1:6), and "Don't neglect the charism which is in you through the laying of my hands on you" (1 Tim. 4:14).

To cast these precepts in such a light may appear a dangerous claim in this age when nothing theological, unless dressed in biblical references, commands hearing and when in theological circles nothing creates so much resentment as an apparent overinterpretation of some biblical passages. Priestly celibacy may seem utterly unbiblical in a theological climate in which even Bethlehem as the place of Jesus' birth passes for a mere allegory. But the allegorical approach is helpless in the face of terse statements, such as Paul's in-

junction to the same Timothy, that a man selected for the office of bishop (presbyter) and deacon has to be "a man of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2). The objection that such is merely a prohibition against ordaining any pagan with several wives or concubines defeats itself by its absurdity. But in this age of cavorting in absurdities, theological and other, contextual argument may stand a better chance than common sense or plain logic.

Now in the same context St. Paul also enjoins Timothy against considering any widow for official help by the congregation unless she is a "woman of one man" (5:9). Again it would be absurd to picture St. Paul as ignorant of the fact that the notion of widow implies the loss of one's husband by death. Even more absurd would it be to assume that St. Paul would have somehow condoned, say, the case of a widow who kept dallying with only one but not several men. In fact he warned young widows against flirtation (1 Tim. 5:11-12). Clearly, in speaking of widows "of one man" he could have in mind only such widows who steadfastly renounced any opportunity to marry again.

Thus in connection with bishops (presbyters) and deacons, St. Paul could only mean with his "man of one wife" that the man in question had to waive his right to another marriage, however legitimate, once his first and only wife died, if he wanted to be ordained or was already ordained. Had a man parted with his widowhood and remarried, he could not receive ordination and, once ordained, he could not marry again.

St. Paul could suggest only by implication the ideal of a celibate priesthood at a time when the overwhelming majority of Christians were adult converts from Judaism and paganism. Mostly married, they could only be told that, if they aspired

to ordination, they had to accept not only the proviso, extraordinary for pagans as well as for most Jews, that marriage was one and indissoluble, but also that their rights to remarry after the death of their spouses had to be given up in return for ordination.

This extraordinary restriction of marriage rights for the to-be-ordained as well as for the already ordained had an inner dynamics of which the subsequent emphasis on celibate priesthood was a logical outcome. Of that logic the Eastern orthodox churches most conspicuously kept the strict celibacy of bishops, mostly selected from among Basilite monks. As to priests, if they were married before ordination, age-old orthodox tradition does not permit them to remarry after they become widowers. An early voice of that tradition was the Council of Neo-caesarea (c. 314) with its first and very terse canon: "If a presbyter has married a wife, let him be removed from the ranks." In faithfully listing this and the many similar conciliar rulings from the golden age of the Patristic Church, an Anglican divine offered a comment which could not help revealing the ecclesiological pitfall opened up by the Protestant rejection of celibate clergy: "The Reformers considered that in this as in most other matters, these venerable churches [of East and West] had made a mistake. . ." (*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Second Series, vol. XIV. The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, p. 365).

Nothing wrong with St. Paul's extraordinary restriction of marriage rights was ever found by those sympathetic to that extraordinary ideal which the same St. Paul had set forth for marriage. He saw it as a replica of that union which is between Christ and the Church. That union is certainly indissoluble but only because it is a most holy union that cannot include

any imperfection as a possible cause of its eventual breaking down.

For the coming of Christ had no other purpose than to make men holy, so that they may be reunited forever into the most Holy Triune God. If to believe this is to take extraordinary faith, it is only because the object of that faith — the reintegration of the once sinful man into the very holiness of God — is nothing but extraordinary. Only when that extraordinary height or depth of our redemption is perceived, only when heaven will loom large as the only truly blissful state available for man, will anything else appear paltry by comparison. Anything else: be it riches, health, education, career, acceptance in high society — and yes, even marital bliss. In the life of saints that outlook is an invariable feature.

Purpose: To make men holy

Had Laura Felice's dad pondered this, he would have had no reason to feel compunction about having invited Father Frank to baptize her. For a priest of "extraordinary faith" has compensations for celibacy which a married man (or woman), who in St. Paul's divinely inspired observation is always divided between earthly and heavenly concerns, can but vaguely suspect. That compensation is the spiritual fatherhood which a priest of "extraordinary faith" may experience on not a few occasions. He may do so above all when he celebrates the Mass with the extraordinary faith that thereby he enters into the closest imaginable symbiosis with the crucified Christ. If his faith makes him see in that symbiosis the highest life-giving role available for man, he will have the only truly positive perspective in which priestly celibacy can be seen. It will become for him the implementation of St.

Paul's experience of "being crucified with Christ."

It takes no degree in New Testament Greek to perceive that experience as the deepest living truth applicable to priests. Margaret Bosco, a desperately poor, largely uneducated, and incredibly hard-working peasant woman, saw far deeper than most recent authors on Mass and priesthood when she walked the long miles home with her son, the future saint, after his first Mass. Suddenly she said to him: "So now you are a priest, John, my son, and will say Mass every day. You must remember this: beginning to say Mass means beginning to suffer. At first you won't notice it, but in time, one day, you will see that your mother is right. . . . Henceforward think of nothing but the saving of souls and don't worry about me." Such was the inner logic of spiritual fatherhood, a logic accurately perceived by a simple Christian widow. Her plain catechism-wisdom had not yet been corrupted by the rash of catechizing initiated by some *periti* of Vatican II who should have known better.

Highest life-giving role

There is then the spiritual fatherhood, seen of course only with spiritual eyes, of administering baptism and especially of hearing confessions. In addition, those blissful experiences of spiritual fatherhood may come even in connection with preaching, catechetical instruction, to say nothing of the carrying of the viaticum to the sick, which may appear a pious hyperbole. Not of course to those moderately familiar with detailed biographies of saints whose letters, spiritual notebooks and recorded private conversations have survived. Francis Xavier is one of the earliest of these saints. Once the extraordinary per-



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spective seized him everything else looked paltry to him, including a brilliant university career in Paris. Years later, he wished he could tell the university community there about the indescribable satisfaction he felt time and again as a spiritual father in faraway India.

A far away land India was, to say nothing of Molucca and Japan. From Portugal to Goa it took ten months on a ship half of whose passengers died on board.

But neither these nor other trials of Xavier were as significant as that night which he spent in agonizing prayer combating a temptation against purity. His agonies were such as to let blood perspire through his skin. (The devil knew the magnitude of the prize he tried to catch.) Xavier possibly thought of the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, words urging anyone who had not "resisted to the point of shedding blood," so that he may not think too highly of his own trials.

Today's pressures not unique

Other examples from other saints' lives could be quoted in reference to the trials of celibacy and the bliss of spiritual fatherhood. As to the latter, it often transpires in their experiencing to the full the spiritual dynamics of the biblical words, first said about mere sheep: "Da mihi animas cetera tolle," words often repeated by Don Bosco and Escriva de Balaguer, to mention only two. Strengthened by that experience they never found it necessary to muse on the countless trials of those given the bliss of physical fatherhood. If they coped with the dark night of soul, and of body, if they never pitied themselves, it was precisely because of their "extraordinary faith." If Father Frank did, his faith was not extraordinary.

The Church was founded by Christ to be the embodiment of extraordinary faith or perspective. And it should seem nothing short of extraordinary that in spite of most ordinary churchmen — from popes through bishops to priests — that extraordinary perspective or mental vision was kept alive as time went on. The times were at times dark indeed. The history of celibacy is a case in point. Countless councils went on record against priestly concubinage. Canonical punishments of the

harshest kind were leveled at offenders — apparently to no avail. At even worse times the abuses were tacitly condoned from the highest places. But even then there have been shining examples to the contrary.

There were times of drastic shortage of priests, such as the years immediately following the Council of Trent. As a remedy, the emperor begged the pope, Pius V, to permit priests to marry. The adamant refusal of the pope (he was adamant because he was a saint) was amply justified by the end of the sixteenth century. God once more produced children of Abraham out of an apparently barren landscape covered with stones. New orders — Jesuits, Piarists, Oratorians — and renewed old ones — Capucin Franciscans, in particular — and the seminaries set up by the decree of the Council of Trent, began to bear ample fruit.

The shortage of priests was no less acute in the wake of the Napoleonic wars which led to the closing of over ninety-five percent of all monasteries and convents in Europe. Yet within a generation the most spectacular rebirth in the Church's life began to take place. Vatican II still has to produce even something remotely similar to the astonishing multiplication of missionaries that carried the Gospel through Africa, the Middle East and the Far East by the closing of the 19th century. There were so many examples of the perception of Newman, still an Anglican: "Heathens, and quasi-heathens (such as the miserable rabble of a large town), were not converted in the beginning of the Gospel, nor now, as it would appear, by the sight of domestic virtues or domestic comforts in their missionary."

The social, psychological and cultural pressures rising today inside and outside the Church against priestly celibacy must be seen in perspective, lest one be intimi-

dated by them. Those ready to throw up their hands on facing the latest of such pressures should remind themselves of the steely resolve with which the Church has resisted them over so many centuries and at times in circumstances far worse than the present ones. An effective reminder does not imply extensive studies of the history of priestly celibacy. It is enough to recall the reply which John XXIII, the proverbial embodiment of compassion, gave to Etienne Gilson who in a private audience in December 1960 touched on the agonizing trials of some priests. For in that reply, later reported by Gilson, one could feel the reverberations of the age-old resolve of the Church: "The Pope's face became gloomy, darkened by a rising inner cloud. Then the Pope added in a violent tone, almost a cry: 'For some of them it is a martyrdom. Yes, a sort of martyrdom. It seems to me that sometimes I hear a sort of moan, as if many voices were asking the Church for liberation from the burden. What can I do? Ecclesiastical celibacy is not a dogma. It is not imposed in the Scriptures. How simple it would be: we take up the pen, sign an act, and priests who so desire can marry tomorrow. But this is impossible. Celibacy is a sacrifice which the Church has imposed upon herself—freely, generously and heroically'."

Chief mission to re-enact Calvary

Had these words, widely publicized in the August 28, 1964 issue of *TIME*, been remembered, several developments might not have taken place. First, when a systematic misinterpretation of a ruling of Paul VI produced an exodus of priests, the latter would not have received encouragement from high places that they would soon be readmitted to the altar. Second, even in



those years of semi-official devaluation of the priceless currency which is priestly celibacy, no chronic oblivion would have developed about the ability of the papacy to stiffen its spine and clear some of its bureaus replete with the fragrance of the Augean stables. Third, after that recovery of spine had taken place, no newsman may have assumed credibility to his surprise over the fact that the Vatican had but an age-old comment on the "Universal Synod of Married Catholic Priests and Their Wives" which took place with about 120 participants in Ariccia, a mountain town 15 miles outside Rome in early September 1985 (see *New York Times*, Sept. 4, 1985, p. 2, cols 3-6). That comment merely recalled an age-old struggle on behalf of a spiritual ideal which cannot be accommodated in the Procrustean bed of cultural fashions overlaid with wax roses.

That the Church, a very human church,

could keep up that struggle over so many centuries in so many adverse circumstances, should seem indeed extraordinary. In a sense, it was most ordinary. No more ordinary a thinker than Nietzsche could perceive: "The Catholic Church shows an extraordinary insight when she insists both on confession and on the celibacy of those sitting in the confessional." That today in the Catholic Church the widespread wavering about celibate priesthood is simultaneous with the drastic decrease of the number of confessions (witnessed by the short hour allotted in most parish churches for confessions on Saturday afternoons) is a piece of inexorable logic.

Escape from the clutches of that logic will not come from seminaries where not a single word, let alone a lecture and much less a systematic course of lectures has been offered on the theology of celibacy, but plenty of time has been wasted on the theology of ecology and rock music. Proper vocations will not flock to seminaries where emphasis is on full exposure to female companionship, psychological "balance," "well-rounded" emotional make-up, to say nothing of its tonsorial kind. No de-emphasis, however slight, on honest to goodness spiritual life will help bring out the extraordinary character of the calling which is priesthood. No timid assimilation to modern culture will stir up that courage and enthusiasm which alone prove contagious in recruiting vocations and which alone are appropriate to the vocation called priesthood. Nor will priests who, like Father Frank as portrayed by Mr. DePalma, want to be no different from "ordinary" men, inspire the best among Catholic youth to give a joyful positive answer to the question: TO BE OR NOT TO BE A PRIEST?

Yet a large number of positive answers to that question is of enormous urgency. Most orders are rapidly aging. The most publicized case is that of the Jesuits. The

decrease since Vatican II of their numbers from thirty-five thousand to below twenty-five thousand should put the lump in any sensitive throat. Only those crudely ignorant of the elementary mathematics of demography will talk it away with wishful references to an eventual stabilization around twenty-two thousand. Possibly closer to reality was the remark of that hard-nosed Jesuit who saw in that decrease the beckoning of a "terminal sickness."

With the exception of Poland and to a less extent of Ireland, the ranks of diocesan clergy show a similar depletion and a similarly alarming average age of almost sixty-five in all of the world's developed countries. Different as those countries can be in many respects, the Catholic clergy is sadly aging in all of them. Perhaps young priests will be seen in large numbers in those countries after they have been visited by Polish missionaries, the first of whom have just arrived in Holland.

Holland is a country which a generation ago was a chief cradle of Catholic missionaries to faraway lands. Of course, those missionaries were still imbued with the conviction that nothing but nothing profiteth a man if he gains the entire world, including his integration into the world of sophisticated taste (intellectual and other), if in the process he loses his very soul. They were imbued with the extraordinary conviction that the chief mission of priests is to re-enact the most extraordinary sacrifice, that of the cross. Living well before this new-fangled biblical age, they were not yet poisoned by its "biblicism," and therefore had the biblical conviction that the priest must have his body crucified to be like his Crucified Lord whom he brings down from heaven to the altar.

But it is precisely this extraordinary conviction which has for some time been downplayed if not outrightly ignored in the new theology. The weakening appreciation of celibacy went hand in hand with the the-

ological downplaying of the sacrificial character of the Mass and with the effort of turning it into a mere "celebration" or banquet. This coincidence will surprise only those transcendentals who all too often ended up crawling on their bellies while they tried to get off the ground. In their "higher" enlightenment, they had apparently never thought of the warning of the letter to the Hebrews: "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith and who for the sake of the joy which lay before him endured the cross, heedless of its shame; . . . so strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. Make straight the paths you walk on, that your halting limbs may not be dislocated but healed" (12:2 and 12).

The failure of transcendentals (from Rahner through Lonergan to Schillebeeckx, to say nothing of their inarticulate camp-followers) to reverse the trend of the closing of so many seminaries and their ineptitude for filling the relatively few remaining ones, speak louder than words. Not surprisingly, "renewed" Catholic laymen find nothing alarming in the situation. They even pity their priest friends when seen in a situation, baptism, where spiritual fatherhood takes the center stage against the backdrop of physical fatherhood. They see nothing ominous in being given communion during Sunday Mass by women in tight skirts and in short-sleeved blouses. They hardly think that holy communion is a death to the world's allurements and an identification with that Christ who has just repeated on the altar his death on the cross. A sad misconception precisely in an age when everything is carried through pictures, when in place of sermons one is often treated during Sunday Mass to a slide show and even a movie. In an age so bent on symbolism, bishops and priests fail to perceive the enormous impact of the sighting, Sunday after Sunday, of women in the sanctuary,

a sight which silently undermines any theological and canonical argument against the ordination of women and the marriage of priests.

Perhaps the recent synod will start the reversal of an utterly mistaken religious psychology that has for some time been taken for genuine theology. This is not to suggest that news media in the service of secular humanism would ever invite Catholic laymen to submit stories on the beauty and dignity of any young man's decision TO BE A PRIEST. ■

* A cassette recording of the above article may be obtained from: Cardinal Communications, Box 34, New London, Conn. 06320. Price \$3.50 postpaid (Canada: add 50¢).


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