

COMMENT

Because we deal with difficult and undecided questions on the frontiers of Christian thinking, we in this journal often have to present opposing viewpoints, to work out the truth in what Newman called a sort of 'night battle' in which friend and foe are hard to distinguish. This is all just a way of saying that, despite what we think of as the distinctive programme of *New Blackfriars*, the editor does not necessarily agree with everything he publishes.

For this reason it sometimes becomes important to indicate when he does. An editor is not just chairman of a discussion and readers have a right to know where he stands on some issues. So I would like to make it clear that I publish Fr. Adrian Hastings's article on the priesthood and marriage not because I think it is an interesting contribution to an important discussion but because I think it is entirely right and that those who disagree with it are just plain wrong.

There are three things to consider here: firstly, should there be a universal rule of celibacy for pastoral clergy in the western Church? secondly, if not, how did it come about that we have one? and thirdly, what should be done about it?

This journal is edited and produced by men and women for whom celibacy is an integral and intelligible part of their way of life. Celibacy is as significant in Dominican religious life as sexual love is in married life. In either case it is an area where failure (and of course there is bound to be some failure sometimes) threatens the structure itself. It is clear that no such considerations apply to the priesthood as such, and the assimilation of the priesthood to religious life has not been helpful to either. It is true that there have been times in the past when the Church has been rescued from the venality and incompetence of the secular clergy by reforming monks and friars but nobody has ever suggested that the Church today is corrupt in *that* sense.

To put it as simply as possible: if the Pope is not satisfied with St. Peter as a model for the priesthood then he is hard to please. Not even the weak arguments from precedent that seek to justify an all-male priesthood can be adduced to restrict it to celibate men. So if the law has no basis in tradition and theology why did it

arise? I doubt whether Fr. Hastings's suggestion that "it grew . . . out of a growing but heretical belief that sex was somehow itself impure . . ." is an adequate explanation. More to the point is his later remark: "It is a matter of power more than anything else."

D. H. Lawrence said: "It is marriage perhaps that has given man the best of his freedom, given him his little kingdom of his own within the big kingdom of the State, given him a foothold of independence on which to stand and resist an unjust State." . . . or, we might add, an unjust Church. A married clergy is of necessity less mobile, less disposable, less amenable to manipulation than a celibate clergy. One of the reasons for, and glories of, celibacy in religious life is precisely to make oneself disposable and easily used by those to whom one has vowed obedience. But it is only the curial official who would like to dispose of the pastoral clergy in this tidy fashion. Their function is not to be mobile but to be rooted, to share the Christian life of those they serve not to lead the distinctive special life of priory or monastery. The campaign for clerical celibacy was part of the Hildebrandine movement of centralisation which resulted in the nineteenth century model of the pyramid Church that Vatican II set out to dismantle.

Of course there are risks in a married clergy just as there are risks with a celibate clergy; most notably the risk that married priests (even without the corruption of medieval nepotism) would settle into a middle-class way of life and lose touch with many of their parishioners. This is a temptation, however, to be removed not by celibacy but by socialism.

The most difficult question is the last: what is to be done? You can make verbal representations, as this journal has occasionally done, but it is not usually in the interests of those in power to pay attention to such arguments. The effective thing is to trigger the deep fear that governs nearly all ecclesiastical authority these days, the fear of a scene. It is presumably with something like this in mind that Fr. Hastings has decided on a unilateral declaration of independence. There can be no rules for deciding when the rules of positive law should be broken. A man must thoughtfully and with prayer resort to that most important virtue that St. Thomas calls *epikeia*. To judge that Fr Hastings has chosen rightly is not to say that every priest who agrees with him should do likewise, it is simply to salute an individual act of courageous witness. Let us hope and pray that it may help to get things moving.

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