

Questioning Celibacy in the Catholic Church

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Spencer Michels looks at the new debate over celibacy in the Catholic church.

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SPENCER MICHELS:

When the American Cardinals met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican recently, they reaffirmed their belief in celibacy.

CARDINAL THEODORE McCARRICK, Archbishop of Washington, D.C.: It's not the easiest road in today's crazy world, but we believe in celibacy. We believe that if you practice celibacy and you practice it with all your heart, with all your love, that you can be free to serve God's people, and to serve God in such a beautiful way.

SPOKESMAN:

Please rise.

SPENCER MICHELS:

But ever since the scandal about priests and the sexual abuse of minors broke, the debate over priestly celibacy has been heated. The newspaper of the Boston archdiocese, The Pilot, last month editorially asked, should celibacy continue for Catholic priests? Would optional celibacy result in fewer sex scandals in the priesthood?

At this San Francisco convent, the idea that celibacy would be questioned drew a strong response from Father Joseph Fessio. He celebrates Mass once a week with the Missionaries of Charity nuns, and he sees no need to change the Church's teachings.

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

Now they're saying, well, we need to get rid of celibacy. That's the problem. The all-male priesthood, that's the problem. We've had celibacy for 2,000 years. We haven't had the problem for 2,000 years. We've only had the problem when people deny the Church's teaching.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Father Fessio, a Jesuit, upholds the traditional, some would say conservative values of the Roman Catholic Church, including celibacy or chastity.

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

See, they think that only priests are celibate. They don't realize you sisters are here. I mean, you sisters are celibate, too. You make the vow to follow Jesus, and to follow him totally with your lives. And you show the world that sexual pleasure isn't everything, that you can be happy, that you can be holy, that you can serve others without that. (Chanting in Latin)

SPENCER MICHELS:

The Catholic Church began demanding an unmarried clergy in the 12th century. The reason for celibacy, according to Father Fessio, is that priests must imitate Jesus Christ in abstaining from having sex.

SPENCER MICHELS:

You just said that the greatest gift was the love between a man and a woman.

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

Yes.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Well, why doesn't a priest get to take part in that?

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

Because we want to give to God the best thing we have in our lives, and that Christ, who's our model, gave that gift to the Father. Christ was a celibate and a chaste male, and we want to give ourselves entirely to God and to the people.

SPENCER MICHELS:

The nuns share that creed. Sister Carmelita is still a novice. She does not consider her vows a repression of her sexuality.

SISTER CARMELITA, Missionaries of Charity: No, it's not a repression. Chastity is not something that you... that you don't do. It's something that you do. The act of sex itself is only one expression of that intense love that you want to show in marriage.

SISTER EMMANUEL, Missionaries of Charity: I discover more and more what I have, not what I am missing, because the relationship with Jesus, you know him better and better as you have years in the religious life. And for me, I am more and more happy.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Robert Charpentier is one of many American Catholics who would like to change Church policy. He says there is room for non-celibate married clergy, something the Church tolerated in its early years, and even tolerates today for priests who transfer from other denominations. Charpentier is a former priest who became a psychologist and left the priesthood in 1975 to marry and eventually raise a family. He, his wife, and two daughters live near San Francisco. When he entered the seminary, he gave up plans for medical school, and also gave up a girlfriend.

ROBERT CHARPENTIER, Psychologist/Former Priest:

I wasn't so sure about the whole celibacy thing. I knew that celibacy and call to priesthood were supposed to go together. I hoped and prayed that I would have the gift of celibacy.

SPENCER MICHELS:

He had no problem with celibacy for the first few years of his priesthood.

ROBERT CHARPENTIER:

Once I had committed, I said, I will really be committed. This doesn't mean that, you know... that I still didn't find, you know, women attractive. That was certainly part of the scene.

SPENCER MICHELS:

After contemplating the seemingly reformist pronouncements of the Vatican II Council of 1965, Charpentier decided the celibate life was not necessary. Catherine is a source of support.

CATHERINE CHARPENTIER:

I wouldn't be here, my sister wouldn't be here, and these... they wouldn't be happy if they'd gone on just to live by the Church rules. I think that something that I've been hearing a lot is that the Church is running out of priests. They need priests, and the fact is that because of all these rules that aren't terribly necessary, priests... people don't want to be celibate. People want to live with human nature. They want to do what makes them happy. They want to have families. They want to live their lives.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Father Victor Sokolov agrees. He's a priest in the Orthodox Church of America, a successor to the Russian Orthodox Church. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches were one before the great schism of 1054. In the Orthodox Church, unlike the Church of Rome, priests are encouraged to marry. And Father Sokolov, who was born in Russia, married an American woman and has five children.

FATHER VICTOR SOKOLOV, Orthodox Church:

So when I counsel people before marriage, during marriage, or people who are not married and yet struggling with a myriad of sexual-related issues, they look at me and see, what is his family life like? And when I... does he speak... says what he says because some instructor of pastoral theology told him back in the seminary, or because he read a couple of books on the human sexuality or on family life, or because he himself lives this, day in and day out?

SPENCER MICHELS:

Father Sokolov says the isolation and celibacy of Roman Catholic priests is not helpful in relating to parishioners.

FATHER VICTOR SOKOLOV:

If I were a celibate man, I would go into my cell and I would go into emptiness, I would go into nothingness. But I have into my own home, where I meet... I met my loving, comforting wife, my soothing, joyous presence of my children, and things are being put into perspective.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Father Fessio argues that if priests don't want to remain celibate and still remain priests, they should switch religions.

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

Well, there are Churches like that. Let them join a Church like that. I mean, those who want to be faithful to the Catholic tradition, what Christ himself has modeled for us, want the Church to remain as He founded it, that's all.

SPENCER MICHELS:

From a practical standpoint, what would be wrong with having married priests?

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

I think it demeans marriage to think that a priest who's really a fully zealous priest, who's trying to save souls and do his apostolate and work, you know, giving sacraments and so on would have time to devote to a wife and children, I think demeans marriage. You can't... it's two total gift lives. You can't give yourself twice. I wouldn't have time to be married.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Wouldn't somebody else who works hard— say, a doctor— face the same kind of situation?

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

Not quite, because, you see, a doctor doesn't... he's not a doctor all the time. A priest is a priest all the time.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Catholicism is not the only religion to require celibacy, according to Nancy Scheper-Hughes, a Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, who describes herself as an alienated Catholic.

NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES, Anthropologist:

Many of the monastic priesthoods have demanded celibacy. Many of the Churches of the world, the great religious traditions, have demanded celibacy of young people before marriage.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Scheper-Hughes says forced celibacy can have psychological effects.

NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES:

There are a great many men who are... feel a vocation to the priesthood, but don't feel a vocation to be celibate, and so that puts them into a really severe conflict, psychological conflict.

PRIEST:

All right, with a little background on the beginning of the Church's teaching on celibacy...

SPENCER MICHELS:

At Marin Catholic High School, in an affluent suburb of San Francisco, 42- year-old Father Thomas Daly teaches religion, and these days, he's spending some time on the scandals and related topics.

STUDENT:

Can they strip them of their vows?

FATHER THOMAS DALY, Marin Catholic High School:

Yes, yes.

STUDENT:

What do they do about that?

FATHER THOMAS DALY:

They get defrocked.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Although he's a supporter of celibacy, he wants his students to realize it always wasn't the way of the Church founders.

FATHER THOMAS DALY:

Now, were the apostles married?

STUDENTS:

No.

FATHER THOMAS DALY:

They weren't? \$4,000 a year, and you don't know that? Kelly, was Peter married?

STUDENT:

No.

FATHER THOMAS DALY:

Yes, he was. Peter was married, and they believe most of the other apostles were. Now, the question is, when Jesus said, you know, "Leave everything and follow me," did that include their spouses?

SPENCER MICHELS:

Like many future priests, as a youngster, Father Daly wasn't sure about celibacy.

FATHER THOMAS DALY:

I knew that, you know, again celibacy, you're going to spend your whole life without a family, without a wife and children, and that's something... I think I needed to date more. And I dated in high school, primarily like to dances and things like that.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Once he took vows of celibacy, he says, all temptation did not automatically evaporate.

FATHER THOMAS DALY:

I have to be very conscious of the fact that it's something that I can never take for granted, much the way I believe a married man can never take his vows for granted. I think I could reduce it to that.

SPENCER MICHELS:

In his job at the high school, Father Daly is constantly dealing with attractive young people, sometimes at school dances. And he has to be careful his attentions are not misinterpreted.

FATHER THOMAS DALY:

The girls want to take certain pictures, you know, at the prom, and they're dressed up. And I guess I've kind of been a little bit more wary of that, because it's all very innocent, but how can people — might view that later on? I think any time you deal with children, you have to always be on your guard. I can't place myself in situations where my fidelity to vows is any way compromised.

SPENCER MICHELS:

The current scandals may have reinvigorated the celibacy debate, but still at issue is whether celibacy has any relationship to priests sexually abusing children or adolescents. The Church has stated before that no link exists between pedophilia and celibacy. That view was reaffirmed after the Cardinals' meeting. They said, "Together with the fact that a link between celibacy and pedophilia cannot be scientifically maintained, the meeting reaffirmed the value of priestly celibacy as a gift of God to the Church." The students in Father Daly's class agree. Do you think that celibacy has anything to do with this scandal?

STUDENT:

Not really.

STUDENT:

No.

SPENCER MICHELS:

No?

STUDENT:

No, I don't think that it's celibacy that's causing the scandal. I think it's mostly... like, with the molestation pedophilia, it's mostly, like, psychological, and people are like that before they become a priest. So I don't think it's the celibacy that's forcing the priests, you know... that's forcing them, that's making them do it. I think it's before they went into the priesthood.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Anthropologist Scheper-Hughes thinks the mandate of celibacy may attract some priests with sexual problems.

NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES:

While I would never want to say that celibacy causes either pedophilia or other kinds of sexual abuse, in the life histories of some of the confessed pedophilic priests, they have said that they felt these inclinations early in their adulthood, and they believed that by entering the Church, that would be a solution to their problems.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Reformers like Bob Charpentier think more study is needed.

ROBERT CHARPENTIER:

We don't really know the connection between mandatory celibacy and sexual acting out, including pedophilia. But to say that there's no connection, as a therapist, leaves me wondering. We have a problem in the Roman Catholic Church, in that, at least to now, the Roman Catholic Bishops have not only not encouraged research in this area, but they have openly discouraged it.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Despite the fact that the debate has been entered, traditional Roman Catholics like Father Fessio see little chance of the Church changing its rules on celibacy.

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

Theoretically, it might be possible, but even the Pope has to obey the tradition. A Pope just can't act, you know, on his own, as if he's a dictator. He has to follow what Christ has taught, what the Church has taught, tradition has taught.

SPENCER MICHELS:

But the Catholic tradition changes a little bit, from time to time.

FATHER JOSEPH FESSIO:

A little bit, from time to time. But this is not a little bit. This is a major thing. This has to do with the following of Christ, the close following of Christ.

SPENCER MICHELS:

Yet in Father Fessio's own city, San Francisco, the Archbishop is proposing that American bishops scientifically study the causes of child abuse, and whether a married priesthood would reduce the incidence of molestation by priests.

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