

# Celibacy and the Catholic priest

By James Carroll May 16, 2010

Like all Catholics, I gratefully depend on the faithful ministry of the many good priests who serve the church. Yet I offer a broad critique of something central to their lives and identities — the rule of celibacy. I write from inside the question, having lived as a celibate seminarian and priest for more than a decade in my youth. Yet when I left the priesthood in 1974, I was more conscious of vowed obedience as the pressing issue than celibacy. I wanted to be a writer, which required a free play of the mind that seemed impossible in the life of “orders.” But now I see how imposed sexlessness and restrictive authority are mutually reinforcing. Power was the issue.

Ironically, in the Bing Crosby glory days, celibacy seemed to convey another kind of power. It was essential to the mystique that set priests apart from other clergy, the Roman collar an *open sesame!* to respect and status. From a secular perspective, the celibate man or, in the case of nuns, woman made an impression simply by sexual unavailability. But from a religious perspective, the impact came from celibacy’s character as an all-or-nothing bet on the existence of God. The Catholic clergy lived in absolutism, which carried a magnetic pull.

The magnet is dead. What I only intuited 35 years ago has become an open conviction shared by many: celibacy cuts to the heart of what is wrong in the Catholic Church today. Despite denials from Rome, there will be no halting, much less recovering from, the mass destruction of the priest sex abuse scandal without reforms centered on the abandonment of celibacy as a near-universal prerequisite for ordination to the Latin-rite priesthood. (“Near universal” because married Episcopal priests who convert are exempt from the requirement. “Latin rite” because Catholic priests of the Eastern rites are allowed to marry.)

No, celibacy does not “cause” the sex abuse of minors, and yes, abusers of children come from many walks of life. Indeed, most abuse occurs within families or circles of close acquaintance. But the Catholic scandal has laid bare an essential pathology that is unique to the culture of clericalism, and mandatory celibacy is essential to it. Immaturity, narcissism, misogyny, incapacity for intimacy, illusions about sexual morality — such all-too-common characteristics of today’s Catholic clergy are directly tied to the inhuman asexuality that is put before them as an ideal.

A special problem arises when, on the one hand, homosexuality is demonized as a matter of doctrine, while, on the other, the banishment of women leaves the priest living in a homophilic world. In some men, both straight and gay, the stresses of such contradiction lead to irrepressible urges that can be indulged only by exploitation of the vulnerable and available, objects of desire who in many cases are boys, whether prepubescent or adolescent. Now we know.

CELIBACY BEGAN in the early church as an ascetic discipline — hermits and desert monks, “virgins” — that was born partly of authentic mysticism, partly of ancient ritual purity codes, and partly of a neo-platonic contempt for the physical world that had nothing to do with the Gospel. The renunciation of sexual expression by men fit nicely with a patriarchal denigration of women that, though contradicting the clear example of Jesus, defined the church of “the Fathers.” Non-virginal women, typified by Eve as the temptress

of Adam, were seen as a source of sin.

But it was not until the Middle Ages, at the Second Lateran Council in 1139, that celibacy was made mandatory for all Roman Catholic clergy. Ironically, this was a reform designed to brace clerical laxity and remove inheritance issues from the administration of church property. But because the requirement of celibacy is so extreme, it had to be mystified as a sacrificial opening to special intimacy with God — “a more perfect way.”

Monastic orders of both males and females had indeed discovered in such sexual sublimation a mode of holiness, but that presumed its being both freely chosen and lived out in a nurturing community. (Religious orders continue to this day with the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as a proven structure of service and contemplation. The vows of such orders are a separate question.) But when the monastic discipline of “chastity” was imposed on all priests as “celibacy” (from the Latin for “unmarried”), something went awry. Sexual abstinence was no longer freely chosen, since the vocation to ordained ministry and the call to the vowed life are not the same thing.

In the ordinary experience of parish priests, there was no intimate community within which to humanely live a sexually sublimated life. Mere repression would have to do, along with loneliness — and perhaps an unbroken attachment to mother. The system broke down early on, and in some eras it broke down big time. Renaissance Catholicism was marked by sexual libertinism. No surprise that Protestants made the jettisoning of the universal celibacy rule a key to the reform they sought, but that only made Counter-Reformation Rome more earnestly attached to the discipline than ever.

WHY HAD celibacy come to matter so much to those in charge of the church? The answer is familiar because celibacy, like other issues having to do with gender, reproduction, and sexual identity, is not really about sex — but power. The hierarchy found in the imposition of sexual abstinence a mode of control over the *interior* lives of clergy, since submission in radical abstinence required an extraordinary abandonment of the will. In theory, the abandonment was to God; in practice, it was to the “superior,” who always thought he was. The stakes were infinite, since sexual desire marked the threshold of hell. “Gravely sinful” defined every priestly deviance, including the minor and intensely personal matter of erotic fantasy. The normally human was, for priests, the occasion of bad faith.

Obsessive sexual moralism, along with that bad faith, spilled out of pulpits. Ancient neo-platonism became modern Puritanism or Irish Jansenism. The confessional booth became a cockpit of “mortal sins,” with birth control emerging as the key control mechanism — the church’s control over every Catholic adult’s affections and actions. The prohibition of “unnatural” contraception made church authorities party to the most intimate exchange between sexual partners, and if the laity were willing to abide by this intrusion and its burdens, it was only because the celibate priest could be seen to have made an even greater sacrifice.

What birth control was to Catholic lay people, in other words, celibacy was to priests — a set of hierarchy-imposed shackles on the conscience. Lay people have broken those shackles, but priests have not, unless the tens of thousands who have left orders are counted.

As is suggested by the hierarchy’s apparent equanimity about that exodus, and the slow-motion collapse of the priesthood it has caused, church authorities will pay any price to maintain a vestige of control over the inner lives of Catholics. That is why bishops have

exchanged their once ample influence on matters of social justice for a screeching, single-issue obsession with abortion, a last-ditch effort to control the intimate sexual decisions of lay people. When it comes to their clergy, the single-issue obsession remains celibacy.

This nearly changed at the Second Vatican Council (1962-'65), a challenge to the power structure that has fueled a reactionary defense of that structure ever since. Recall that the Council, a gathering in Rome of the world's Catholic bishops, initiated astonishing changes in church doctrine and practice (renouncing, for example, the anti-Jewish "Christ-killer" slander, though it is in the Gospels). The bishops took on a range of questions, and were preparing to reconsider both birth control and celibacy.

As dominant matters of sexual morality for the laity and the clergy, they were twinned. That those issues were even on the Council's agenda alerted the Catholic world to the possibility of change — which was itself revolutionary.

Until then, an insufficiently historically minded church had regarded such contingent questions as God-given absolutes. What was the point of even discussing them, since change was out of the question? But change was suddenly in the air, and that made Catholics begin to ask questions on their own. What? St. Peter was married? Even before the Council acted, the myth that these disciplines were eternally willed by God was broken.

That was enough to generate waves of panic in the most conservative wing of the hierarchy, waves that broke over the insecure Pope Paul VI, who had replaced the far more open-minded John XXIII.

POPE PAUL astonished the Council fathers, and the Catholic world, by making two extraordinary interventions that violated both the spirit and the procedures that had defined the Council until then. In late 1964, just as the fathers were about to debate the question of "responsible parenthood," the pope ordered the Council not to take up the question of "artificial contraception." Snap! Birth control was "removed from the competence of the Council," a harbinger of Paul VI's own determination that the teaching would not change.

But there was every sign that the Council fathers, when they inevitably took up the subject of the priesthood, were still going to discuss celibacy, as if change were possible there.

Yet it was politically unthinkable that the church could maintain the prohibition of birth control, the burden belonging to the laity, while letting clergy off the sexual hook by lifting the celibacy rule. Therefore, in late 1965, Paul VI made his second extraordinary intervention to forbid any discussion of priestly celibacy. "It is not opportune to debate publicly this topic," he declared, "which requires the greatest prudence and is so important."

A Council had initiated the clerical discipline of celibacy, but a Council was now not qualified even to discuss it. The power play was so blatant as to lay bare power itself as the issue. And just like that, Catholics had reason to suspect that celibacy was being maintained as a requirement of the priesthood because of internal church politics — not because of any spiritual or religious motive. God was not the issue; the pope was.

The abrupt elimination of the mystical dimension of vowed sexual abstinence left it an intolerable and inhuman way to live, which sent men streaming out of the priesthood, and stirred in many who remained a profound, and still unresolved, crisis of identity. The Council did not take up the question of priestly celibacy. Paul VI sought to settle it with his

1967 encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, which proved to be a classic instance of the disease calling itself the cure.

The celibacy encyclical, maintaining the weight of “sacrifice” on clergy, prepared the way for the laity crushing *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, with its re-condemnation of birth control.

In response to the pope’s 1964 removal of birth control from the “competence” of the Council, one of its leading figures, Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens of Belgium, had risen immediately with a warning; “I beg you, my brother bishops, let us avoid a new ‘Galileo affair.’ One is enough for the Church.” Galileo was famously forced to renounce what he had seen through his telescope, an imposition of dishonesty. (“And yet it moves,” he was reported to have muttered under his breath.)

Paul VI’s twin reimpositions of the contraception and celibacy rules plunged the whole church into a culture of dishonesty. God is solemnly invoked on matters that have nothing to do with God, and that is widely known. For the sake of the mere *appearance* of the hierarchy’s authority, sexual proscriptions have been officially upheld, even while the hierarchy itself looks the other way when those proscriptions are massively repudiated.

CATHOLIC LAY people ignore the birth control mandate. Catholic priests find ways around the celibacy rule, some in meaningful relationships with secret lovers, some in exploitive relationships with the vulnerable, and some in criminal acts with minors.

If a majority of priests is able to observe the letter of their vow, how many do so at savage personal cost? How many Catholic women’s eyes have opened to the built-in gender insult of an all-male celibate priesthood? Well-adjusted priests may live happily as celibates, but how many regard the discipline as healthy? Insisting that celibacy is the church’s “brilliant jewel,” in Paul VI’s phrase, defines the deceit that has corrupted the Catholic soul.

But the most damaging consequence of mandatory celibacy for priests lies in its character as the pulse of clericalism. The repressively psychotic nature of this inbred culture of power has shown itself in the abuse scandal.

Lies, denial, arrogance, selfishness, and cowardice — such are the notes of the structure within which Catholic priests now live, however individually virtuous many of them nevertheless remain. Celibacy is that structure’s central pillar and must be removed. The Catholic people see this clearly. It is time for us to say so.

*James Carroll’s column appears regularly in the Globe. His new book, “Practicing Catholic,” just appeared in paperback. ■*