

Priests and Romantic Love - A Woman's Perspective

Since this Website was launched in the summer of 2009, many women and priests have been in contact to share their experience of falling in love. The article below is from the perspective of Marie, a woman who was in love with a priest and he with her for several years and how their romantic relationship developed and, sadly, ended. Marie shares many insights into the dynamic of romantic love in the context of the priesthood. Her experiences are not unique and will be helpful to others in similar situations.

From Marie:

Catholic Priests' Emotional Instability Toward Women

One area in which many an otherwise capable or even gifted priest falls short is having a basic understanding and relationship with women. In particular, if he develops feelings for a woman or a woman falls in love with him, most priests will lack the compassion, maturity, and knowledge that comes easy to them in other areas of their ministry. This article explores possible causes of this deficiency, as well as the devastating repercussions it can have for priests and women.

When a Young Man Receives His Priestly Calling

Most priests enter the seminary at a young age, often shortly after high school graduation, having begun to discern the vocation as early as middle school. Young men are attracted to the vocation by the promise of an instant community with like-minded peers, a belief that Jesus has personally "called" him to this lofty status, and the ego-boost of instant respect and recognition for making such a noble choice. Such attractions are hard for a cradle Catholic to resist, especially if he was born into a deeply religious family. The adulation of family and parishioners, coupled with confidence in his having chosen "the better way," and the promise of a rich reward in Heaven make a heady brew indeed; and this, for some, even before the sexual awakening of puberty.

Older and respected priests are sometimes encouraged to evangelize aggressively young men and draw them to the vocation. A young man is

often caught off guard and believes that an invitation to the priesthood is a “sign” that God is calling him.

When a man enters the seminary, his interaction with females (other than those in his immediate family) is cut off completely, both by his physical isolation in an all-male institution and by strict prohibitions against associating with women during his vacations. This happens at the very time when feminine influences in his life are so critically important for his psychosexual development, which is consequently stunted. Although some men do leave the seminary prior to ordination, many are already on auto-pilot, having received donations and encouragement for his education by his family and others.

The average age for a man to be ordained is 25; however, if he has been exposed to no other lifestyle than the seminary, he probably has not experienced enough of life at that age to discern the entirety of his commitment. A commitment that by definition forces him to deny his basic emotional needs, desires, and intimacy that are God’s most precious gifts to us—for the rest of his life. Thus, in the black-and-white world of Roman Catholic sexual morality, many seminarians and priests instinctively come to regard women either as Virgin Marys or whores.

Priests are Dehumanized in their Role

After ordination, the priest basks for a while in his newly found acceptance, adulation, and mission, convinced that he has one of the most important vocations known to man—for, who else can administer the sacraments? The busyness of priestly ministry, the belief that he is saving souls, and the contact with others that it affords, serve to keep a priest from getting lonely. For a while.

After a few years, the repressed instincts of his adolescent years start to assert themselves, and many priests yearn for the intimacy that their mandatory celibacy has denied them. They witness the happy glow of couples being married and the joy of family celebrations, then return to the loneliness of an empty rectory. Diocesan priests are also at the whim of the bishop to take required assignments, and some of these may not be desirable to the priest—

not all priests “fit” well with a certain parish or with fellow priests in their living quarters. Eventually, their black-and-white view of life starts shifting to shades of gray.

Meanwhile, pedophile scandals have caused parishioners to be more cautious in the invitations that they extend to a priest. He is no longer automatically on a pedestal, as he had heretofore been viewed. This increases his loneliness profoundly. He often must rely on extended family for friendship or holidays, and not all priests have family who live nearby.

Most of all, a priest longs to be seen for who he is beyond his priestly role—a human being with feelings who needs to connect intimately with others by sharing his joys, sorrows, and tears. He longs for authenticity with another human being so that he can express his innermost thoughts, share a warm hug, and have a shoulder to cry on. But the unwritten rules of the celibate lifestyle and his role to protect the power of the Catholic Church have forced him to keep himself aloof from women in his peer group.

At some point, he may meet a woman who sees his essence and humanness, who invites him to share his true feelings about life in general, who has that shoulder to cry on. At first, he may deny to himself that his feelings for this special woman could affect his priestly vocation—if he feels love, he will likely deny this to himself initially; he cannot name it, but when it comes along, he will certainly recognize it in time. Inevitably, there occurs a sudden breakthrough into intimacy, regardless of how expressed.

In short, the priest falls in love.

Three Choices for Priests in Love

If a priest falls in love, he has three choices for his future lifestyle:

- 1) The Celibate Way: Keeping his sexual urges under control and unexpressed. He prays that his feelings will stop. He cuts off all contact with the woman. This leaves him lonelier than he was before.

2) The Marital Way: Marrying the woman. This option demands, in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, leaving priestly ministry, and is usually frightening and unacceptable to his theology. It's worth stating that this option is the only "sin" that automatically disqualifies a priest. And *that* sin only applies to cradle Catholics. A former Anglican priest who is already married can become a Catholic priest.

3) The Third Way: The Third Way means that a priest can interact with a woman in a celibate but otherwise intimate way, or even carry on a clandestine sexual relationship while maintaining his role as a priest. As long as nothing becomes *openly* scandalous (thus possibly diluting the power of the Church), the Third Way allows the priest to "have his cake and eat it too."

The Third Way can only last for so long before the woman will eventually want a concrete answer as to whether he is willing to leave the priesthood for marriage. If the priest has no intention of leaving the priesthood, he is deeply conflicted as he goes through cycles of unchastity, confession and attempts at amendment. If the priest is uncertain, he must opt for either celibacy or marriage.

Stockholm Syndrome in the Priesthood (aka the "Patty Hearst" Syndrome)
"Stockholm Syndrome" is defined as: *An extraordinary phenomenon in which a hostage begins to identify with and grow sympathetic to his/her captor.* (Wikipedia.)

Nearly everyone experiences Stockholm Syndrome at some point in life. The "captor" need not be a threatening entity, though it must be perceived as one. Even fear of change can trigger a lesser level of the syndrome. For example, someone in a bad marriage may stay in it for fear of leaving, even if they are free to do so. People stay in jobs they hate for the same reason.

In normal circumstances, the relationship between a couple will rise or fall on its own merits. With a priest, it is different. He can't go through the normal channels of dating to discern whether he should marry a particular person or even marry at all. If he mentions his amorous feelings to a priest counselor, he will probably be advised to pray more and avoid the woman at all costs. If he is truly engulfed in Catholic teaching, he will also equate defying church

law as defying God (i.e. mortal sin) and, for the sake of his eternal salvation—*and the salvation of his beloved*—he will not choose marriage. He will instead return to celibacy, believing that this “sacrificial love” is for the woman, ending their time together on earth for the “perfect eternal love” he hopes to share with her in Heaven. In short, he will not have the theology that permits him to leave the priesthood, no matter how strong his love for the woman may be.

The four characteristics of Stockholm Syndrome can apply to priesthood.

1. *The hostage views the captor as giving life by not taking it. The captor is in control of the captive’s basic needs for survival.* The priest is promised eternal life if he’s a good priest and remains celibate. He relies on the church for life’s necessities, and he may feel that he would not have the skill or connections to survive in the outside world, especially if he has served as a priest for a long time. Thus, he allows the church to control both his life here on earth and his salvation in the Hereafter.

2. *The hostage endures isolation from other people and has only the captor’s perspective available. The outside world’s response is either hidden or renounced to make the captive more dependent.* Priests are brainwashed with the theory that the church is always right. One consequence of this is that they cannot even allow themselves to think about anything that would threaten their celibacy.

3. *The captor threatens to kill the victim and gives the perception of being able to do so. The captive judges it safer to align with the captor than to resist and face murder.* For the priest, eternal damnation is considered infinitely worse than being murdered. If a priest decides to leave, he faces an enormous uphill battle, with condemnation and shaming by the institution who has held him captive. It’s much safer for the priest to pray for his demon of love to end.

4. *The captive sees the captor as showing some degree of kindness. Captives will suppress their anger at the captor’s terrorizing and concentrate on his good qualities in order to protect themselves.* For the priest, all is forgiven if he repents. He is well supported in a middle-class lifestyle, and is exalted within the institution far more than he is in the outside world, especially today.

When Love is on the Table

If a single woman (or a woman in a bad marriage) wants to receive absolution in the church, where does she go? She must go to a priest. A long term spiritual issue could involve several sessions with a priest, telling him her darkest secrets and personal problems. Both parties are vulnerable—the priest, who rarely experiences intimacy on any level, and the woman, who seeks spiritual counseling because she already has issues to resolve. The natural outcome of such a scenario between a lonely, celibate priest and a troubled woman whom he finds attractive, is that he wants to “save” her and she is wanting to be “saved.” Inevitably, a bond forms between them.

When love strikes a priest and a Catholic woman, it’s often much more powerful than when people meet through normal channels, simply because neither of them are *seeking* a relationship, but are accidentally *finding* someone to love. It is *not* due to simple infatuation or forbidden temptation. (This is a myth that I find offensive.) In fact, the *opposite* is true. The Catholic woman is afraid of her feelings and hates herself for having them just as much as the priest does! She has likely been fed the same black-and-white worldview that he has. She knows that it is wrong and impossible to love a priest. Neither party wants to admit, to the other or even to self, that they feel more than platonic love, and this repression only leads to strengthened feelings. Down the road, it is usually the woman who finally admits to herself that she has feelings for the priest. The priest may admit it to himself, but be convinced that any feelings of romantic “love” are from the devil.

Admitting to myself that I loved a priest took me almost a year. Most women in a similar position feel that it’s their duty to pull back immediately because that’s the only way to have a clear conscience if you believe that loving a priest is sinful. I started going to other parishes instead, and he was hurt. Then we became very close and he pulled back, and I was hurt. This endless cycle, being sinfully close (in our minds) and then backing off, went on for over three years. We craved each other’s company. Our wills were strong in trying to stay apart, but our hearts were unable to deny our feelings, and we became obsessed with thoughts of the other, but afraid of getting hurt and terrified of eternal damnation.

If he begins to discern his vocation, the priest has much more to lose than the woman he loves. The thought of leaving the priesthood can be terrifying because it removes the only form of financial and societal support the priest has known. Worse, he runs the very real risk of debasement in others' eyes, or even in his own, for having failed in his vocation. Women, because they can never be priests, know *conceptually* that priests are off-limits, but cannot relate to the *actual* experience of marriage to an institution versus marriage to a flesh and blood human being.

Eventually, the woman will consider forcing the priest to discuss the relationship, and call upon him to choose between severing the relationship and staying in the priesthood, or leaving the priesthood to marry her so that they can have an above-board, open and public relationship.

Really, it cannot be otherwise.

If a priest has been showing obvious signs of love for the woman, and she loves him, eventually she must choose between three options. One, she can continue in the Third Way which becomes extremely painful and degrading the longer it continues. Two, she can sever all ties with him, which is more painful in the short term. Or, three, she can tell the priest where she stands, which results in his entering a time of discernment as to whether he should leave the priesthood or sever the relationship altogether. In today's climate, the latter usually ensues.

Often, one person or the other will attempt to stay in touch, and the other will back off completely. In my case, I backed off completely, which hurt like hell. The outcome, if marriage is completely off the table, is always painful for both the priest and the woman.

As a result, polarization and guilt or anger usually occurs. The priest may become even more entrenched in Catholic ideology to prove to himself that he made the right decision; since the Church cannot be wrong, his feelings of love must be. The woman may leave the Catholic Church altogether, believing that the feelings of God-given love are not wrong, and so the Church must be.

The Aftermath (For the Priest) of Rejecting Love

Having known other women on the receiving end of this religious abuse, I can say with some certainty that the priest will act much like a schoolboy once honesty or an ultimatum is presented to him by the woman. This may well be the first time he has had romantic feelings for a woman. As I mentioned before, his psychosexual development may have been arrested when he entered the seminary as a teenager, and as a result he treats the woman as would a teenager.

Her openness evokes not love, but fear. Fear that she, angry at his rejection, will report him to the bishop. Fear of losing his job, his friends, his reputation. Fear of the unknown, the “outside” world. He is angry at the woman for causing this Fear to arise, for ending (in his eyes) their relationship, for being nothing but a temptress after all, just as he had been taught to believe. He might even be angry at her for wrecking his image of her as an obsequious admirer who dared to look past his Role as priest and into his humanity. How dare she!

He must act before the woman does. He can't rely on her to keep her mouth shut. He'll go to his priests' support group and tell them that a woman declared her love for him. He may even tell them terrible things about her to defuse the situation in the event that he is denounced. He will be praised by his counselor for his sacrificial love. Sooner or later, he will receive a new parish assignment.

He'll go on as if nothing had happened and as if he'd never known love. But the catch is, he has. Once the dust has settled and he realizes that the woman didn't report him to anyone, that his vocation and reputation are intact, he will feel deep grief and longing.

Regardless, the priest knows that he must get over his beloved. The easiest way to do this is to convince himself that she would have been wrong for him anyway; his initial anger and subsequent aloof or even nasty behavior toward her help to ensure the death of any tender feelings that may linger between

them. If she leaves Catholicism as a result, he's further convinced that he made the correct decision to remain a priest.

From a woman's perspective, it's hard to say what the long term effects might be; these will differ for each individual and depend on many factors. I do believe that the shades of gray he experienced will always remain with him, despite a renewed show of stoicism. Time and physical distance help to heal, but no matter where life takes him, the priest will always go to bed alone.

The Aftermath of Rejection for the Woman

The woman is shocked that a man who was so kind to her, her closest confidante, who loved her (and perhaps always will), has suddenly turned as cold as a block of stone. She is deeply wounded when the priest rejects her. Typically he goes even further to treat her badly, overcompensating for his earlier, too romantic behavior. Such a hurt can last the woman a lifetime.

Many of these women leave Catholicism as a result of witnessing such painful hypocrisy. Many never marry (or remarry, if they were seeking counseling for a bad marriage). Both of these courses of action are as life-altering as having loved a priest, if not more so. When she sees a priest, she no longer thinks of the Lord, she thinks of the Pharisees. She thinks of the man who hurt her beyond repair. How can she, a cradle Catholic, reconcile her love of God with the twisted dictates of the only faith she has ever known?

For weeks, months and even years, the woman will wonder what she did to deserve being treated so poorly by the priest. She may try to reach out to him with little or no response. She may regret opening the door of love for him. She often wishes they could return to the Third Way and feels in her darkest moments that she ruined the happiness she had known with the priest. Her self-esteem takes a serious hit. Time will heal her wounds, though never completely. No matter what course her life takes afterward, she will always hold that love, and that hurt, somewhere deep inside.

Marie is author of www.formercatholic.com.