

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

One of the greatest joys of my life is to gaze into the smiling face of my wife. She like no other can turn darkness into light and sadness into joy. We have been married for ten years and her companionship has been a great blessing to my life. But, my love for her disqualified me from continuing in the priesthood.

Given the positive influence my wife has been upon me, I am continually puzzled why marriage and the priesthood are mutually exclusive. Sometimes I want to stand on the roof and shout to the hierarchy, "Marriage is holy! I have not been defiled by my wife! She has deeply enriched my life and ministry! Why does love disqualify priests from ordained ministry?"

Then the sadness comes and then the anger.

Then I remind myself that even if priests could marry, there are other issues that I find incompatible with my faith. A major pillar upon which so much of Catholic Church teaching rests is papal infallibility. And therein lies the real problem.

Infallibility, an attribute of God.

How do you challenge God?

It's hard for God to change his mind.

Significant reform within the priesthood will not occur because of theological persuasion. Persuasive arguments against mandated celibacy, Infallibility and other areas of needed Church reform were made centuries ago and continue to be made today but to no avail. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church is interested in one thing, the continuation of celibate male control of the priesthood and Church. This is their main concern and the demon we face. It does not respond to reason. The stench of its odor can be detected within corridors of the Vatican, cathedrals and chanceries throughout the world. They have sacrificed thousands of priests in homage to celibate male power, not to mention the many women whose priestly gifts have also been dismissed.

But change is occurring now as Catholics lose faith in the Church, yet find a profound and robust interior spiritual life. If they still attend church its for different reasons. They go, not out of obligation, but because of their desire for a community where they can celebrate faith and share their lives. Their locus of control is no longer externalized in an ecclesiastical institution but is internalized within their own souls. For them, the Church is still important but it has lost its power.

This transformation is represented in the lives of priests who have left the priesthood. Within their lives the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit are manifest. They continue to do Christ's work and the Holy Spirit leads and guides them apart from the authority of the Church. They are like Toto in the Wizard of Oz who pulled back the curtain and revealed the little man pulling the levers of power.

All the smoke and fire is an illusion.

We have nothing to fear.

We have found freedom and a whole new world that exists ... over the rainbow.

16 Comments

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Georgecheck **said...**

Glad you added a blog page. This will really open up dialogue.

Best of luck.

Georgecheck

October 29, 2008 10:09 AM

Penny said...

The church has long had a hierarchical system of sacraments - by their own behavior they rate matrimony way below holy orders. Look at the stand on the

indissolubility of holy orders compared to the easy annulment of marriage - even in these conservative times.

While many lay people welcome this easier approach to marriage - I don't, I think it hypocritical - it does speak of a darker attitude to marriage compared to the "sacredness" of holy orders.

Penny

December 16, 2008 9:32 AM

Conrad said...

Penny, sad to say, you're right about the Church's holding a vocation to the priesthood in higher esteem than matrimony. On the other hand, this might be a case of "oranges and apples," i.e., an invalid comparison.

The Church declares that Holy Orders is indissoluble to protect the sacramental effects of actions performed by the priest. If those "orders" for a certain priest were subsequently annulled and declared invalid from their beginning, would not a penitent, whose mortal sins were forgiven by that priest in the confessional, have to question whether his sins had actually been forgiven?

And yet, at the same time, the Church teaches that children born of a marriage that was subsequently annulled are legitimate, as long as the marriage was thought to be a valid union at the start (all the required formalities for entering a valid marriage having been fulfilled). Hmmm...

A further thought. Which is the more powerful sacramental sign: the one-time laying on of hands to ordain a priest (witnessed, incidentally, by none of those to whom the priest would later minister) or the day-to-day loving union of a man and a woman in matrimony? The latter, of course! But the sacramentality and sacredness of sexual union has been denigrated over the centuries by pelagian and victorian attitudes toward all things sexual. What a shame!

Conrad

January 17, 2009 8:31 AM

Henry said...

Conrad stated “The Church declares that Holy Orders is indissoluble to protect the sacramental effects of actions performed by the priest.” Although this is true, I wonder how many Catholics really believe that God does what the Church proclaims. Catholic teachings presume to speak for God and Church officials seem to believe God is obedient to their commands, but I wonder what percentage of Catholics really believe this. I presume it’s quite low, yet the hierarchy claims to speak for the majority.

When I was ordained, I must have believed the Church had this power but now have difficulty comprehending how I ever really believe such nonsense. In fact, I now consider giving such power to a church or any individual to be dangerous.

There are plenty of Islamic fundamentalists who believe they speak for God and are doing God’s will as they engage in carnage. Catholicism is certainly less violent; however, spiritually they consider their damnations to hell, like the Islamists, to be very real. And during the Inquisition and Crusades, they were all too willing to also engage in bloodshed. It must be noted that the Church did not voluntarily relinquish such violence; it was done so by secular decree. Who knows what tyranny we would be living under if the Church would have been successful in the maintenance of its theocracy. Thank God for the separation of Church and State, but we must remember that it came about in spite of Catholicism. The spiritual foundation upon which the separation of Church as State rests is the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

Religions with absolutist claims can be dangerous. The old adage seems to be very true: “Follow those who are seeking God and flee from those who claim to possess God.”

January 17, 2009 9:47 PM

Anonymous said...

the gifts of the holy spirit are not contained or limited by any establishment or hierarchy. a legitimate spiritual hierarchy can be invoked and held by lines of transmission and initiation amongst holy people, but also the unseen initiator is present and may bless the individual. there is a lot of cultural space for sacred learning outside the oppressors citadel and
openness and mindfulness is key...
a fish in the waters not thirsty.

in some ancient buddhist practices
all embrace with woman is considered sacred material this is why some women who seem comfortable in a love relationship with men of the cloth might feel more comfortable with mahayana or even vajrayana practitioners ,such as tibetan monks those that were not the yellow bearing hinayanists which are celibate. Women who love the other monks invoke the goddess upon and within in them prior to lovemaking and gazing this is the traditional practice
what i have been taught is that sexuality and sensuality is sacred and each gesture is placed in the chalice of reverence . i have learned to explicitly be within this space with the beloved

what is offensive to me as being a
woman who longstanding in a love relationship with a priest ...is that the church may have given sex and sensuality a coloring or a context which is not sacred . my experience teaches me otherwise a particular sacrament might be invoked for people of the cloth moving towards intimacy or in intimacy
such as pouring a sacred water into a sacred water or
breaking open geodes
while gazing

all the while mumbling the sacred songs which come as a gift from god
it might be best not to institutionlize such practices outside of asia where such

sacred sensual practices are highly revered

it is good to approach all beings with compassion we are all learning i have had to unlearn many harmful practices and through many losses have started fresh with new frames on the infinite one day hoping to keep the infinite precious and vast as is its own nature

i have found it

its good to be spacious in regard to sensuality and let it express itself within our own chalices and bodies

blessings

mary

May 23, 2009 7:14 PM

Anonymous said...

I find this site to be TERRIBLY disturbing.

As a male in my 40's, I considered the holy priesthood. Why didn't I pursue it? Simple: I did not have the charism of celibacy (at least not then in my 20's.)

EVERY Catholic boy and girl knows that their priests are to be celibate. Those that claim that their priestly formation did not equip them to deal with celibacy are simply lying to themselves. Six to eight years goes into priestly formation. What part of Catholic priest = celibate man, isn't understood? From childhood, every Catholic boy and girl knows that Fr. John doesn't have a wife or girlfriend like Lutheran Pastor Bob and his wife Mary. Men going into the priesthood know that to be a priest is to be single and celibate. What part is not understood?!?! Everyone knows that the requirement of priesthood is celibacy - plain and simple. If you do not have the charism of celibacy, DON'T BE A PRIEST! That doesn't make you less of a person!!! Share your spiritual gifts in another way. St. Paul says that we ALL have DIFFERENT spiritual gifts! Whether mandatory celibacy is right or wrong is not the

point. It's the discipline of our Church and must be obeyed. The Church may one day reverse mandatory celibacy, but for now, it is what it is and to contradict it is to create confusion and contention. And, those that want it changed, well, good luck doing it from the "outside."

Please keep in mind, MANY spiritual practices and traditions require celibacy. Is a celibate a more exalted state than a married person? Maybe. Is a PhD a greater honor than a B.A.? I would think so. Celibates are willing to sacrifice a very fundamental desire in order to service without the constraints of family life. That is a noble thing! On the other hand, if marriage weren't dignified, then it wouldn't be a Sacrament, now would it?

Priests who break their vows of celibacy are no different than a man or woman that commits adultery. If this blog condones priests "exploring" their sexuality, then this blog should also condone adultery and polyamory because in essence, those here are saying that mandatory celibacy is unfair. Perhaps marital fidelity is unfair as well. Think about it...especially you ladies that are having intimate relations with a priest. And, ladies, in this case the married man's spouse isn't another woman...it's GOD. You might be able to cat fight another woman for your "man," but I think you are no match for GOD Himself.

As a priest once said, some times God calls a person to religious life for a lifetime and sometimes for a season. It's all to learn and grow. Leave the priesthood if you realize it isn't your vocation, but do not blame the Church because this is not YOUR vocation as it is for thousands of others.

August 25, 2009 7:56 AM

Henry said...

Anonymous,

I can see why you find this site "terribly disturbing". Once the illusions of one's faith are challenged, it is at first disturbing.

What you are failing to understand is that mandated celibacy is not the will of God regardless of what the ecclesiastical institution proclaims. They do not speak for God with this teaching. Jesus healed Saint Peter's mother-in-law, which is to say that Peter was married. For the first 1000 years of the Church's history, priests were allowed to marry. From Genesis onward, marriage has been the norm for humanity. It is a divine right that no church law can negate. So priests who come to realize this are free to leave and their departure is not only blessed by God, it is a prophetic act to a wayward Church.

Over the past 40 or so years, 25,000 priests have transitioned out of the priesthood. This is more than half of the present Roman Catholic priests in the US. The rigidity of the institution forced them out. It is a sad commentary on a Church that proclaims itself "universal". Optional celibacy would be another matter.

There are many very dedicated priests presently serving in ministry, but their dedication is in spite of mandated celibacy, not because of it. If allowed many, probably the majority, would marry and continue to serve with the same devotion as they do now. Perhaps even more so because they would be ministering from a position of loving, intimate companionship.

We read in scripture that "God is love." Yet, love disqualifies priests from ministry. Any way you look at it, mandated celibacy contradicts the will of God as seen in the scriptures and serves to oppress good and faithful priests.

I hope you are able to look beyond what the Church has prescribed for you to believe. There you will find freedom and truth.

August 26, 2009 7:25 AM

Conrad said...

Henry has already responded very logically and convincingly regarding the mandate of celibacy for Roman Catholic priests. Here's another perspective from someone who's been there.

Mr. Anonymous, I find your approach legalistic and pharisaical. To start from the

position of “it’s the law,” rather than from a consideration of all the factors involved, is unreasonable. A parent’s “because I said so” is not helpful to the child, and betrays, rather, the parent’s need to be in control.

I would prefer to comment on your primary question, “what part of Catholic priest = celibate man” is not understood? I can only speak from my own personal experience.

I believe the answer lies in the impossible demands made upon me by a church and a familial milieu that demanded a constant striving for perfection, and a social-religious atmosphere that unquestioningly took as gospel whatever the Church said. This led to an attitude, during my years in the seminary from the age of 16 on, that I needed to choose the path in life where I could do the most good with the years God allotted to me. My repeated failures in chastity during that time (masturbation – always duly confessed along with a firm purpose of amendment) only served to exacerbate my already poor self-image and drove me to a perfectionism that had me convinced, again because this is what I heard the Church telling me, that it is possible to be perfect, and therefore that SOME-how, without the slightest idea of just EXACTLY how, things would all work out all right. That was all taken for granted. Hardly an apt preparation for what was to come!

During all my seminary days, spiritual direction was woefully lacking. Nowhere along the line did any spiritual director sit down with me and explore my feelings, my aptitudes, my emotional and physical needs and urges. Sex education was limited to studying the reproductive organs in physiology. Personal spiritual advice was limited to one and ONLY one instance, which consisted in my confessor sternly reprimanding me for having masturbated and demanding that, if I committed that awful deed ONE more time, I would leave the seminary. Now. Go figure. Do you really believe that I was suitably prepared to dealing with sexual issues once I was out in a lonely rural rectory? I don’t think so!

Mr. Anonymous, you are also confusing vocations. A vocation to priesthood is not a vocation to celibacy, nor vice-versa. One does not have to be celibate to be a good priest, as was very well known in the first half of the Catholic Church’s existence,

and still is today in Eastern Rite churches as well as in Roman Rite churches that have ordained married Protestant clergymen to the Catholic priesthood, and permitted them to remain married and with their families. I am convinced that I had a vocation to priesthood. I am equally convinced that I never enjoyed the charism of celibacy.

Marriage to God? What a ridiculous concept! (Except perhaps in a metaphorical sense. Now, please define "metaphorical adultery.")

Conrad

September 2, 2009 10:32 AM

Anonymous said...

Conrad,

I'm shocked that during your seminary training you were almost booted because of masturbating? Does the sacrament of confession not have any "power" to forgive? Seems that priests and seminarians ARE held to some "higher standard" and expected to be perfect in this discipline! Juxtapose that with marriage - adultery isn't grounds for an annulment - nor is masturbation for that matter! This seems ridiculous.

To Mr. Anonymous as well:

And frankly, for many young men entering the seminary (especially in the "old days") could one truly understand what celibacy would mean to them for the rest of their lives? How many of us understand our own sexuality or can fully comprehend marriage in our teen years or even early 20's? One has barely socially matured by that age.... Add to that the sheltered environment of the seminary and/or minor seminary and it seems to me a recipe for psychosexual arrested development.

For too long in the Church sex and the body have got a bad rap. No wonder celibacy and perfect continence/virginity have been "put up on pedestals" as the ideal state. Gosh, we'd die off!!!! I have no doubt that celibacy is a way to keep control of the priests because it keeps them dependent on the system and

dependent emotionally as well. No other "influences" can take hold very easily, since priests aren't really allowed to have close relationships with anyone outside - and if they do, those relationships are always suspect in one way or another.

September 4, 2009 7:19 AM

Conrad said...

Anonymous #2,

You said a mouthful pointing out the "recipe for psychosexual arrested development."

For decades lately, I've been haunted by wonderings about how different my life, my attitudes and my loves might have been, had I had normal interaction with the opposite sex during my teenage years!

That the victorian environment in which we seminarians in the 40s and 50s were kept was psychologically crippling is, in my estimation, indisputable. And, Mr. Anonymous #1, I DO blame the Church for THAT.

Conrad

September 4, 2009 9:06 AM

Anonymous said...

I am in love with a Catholic Priest. Though I am not Catholic any more, I did have some misgivings, mostly because I care about him and do not want him to be involved in anything that he might regret later.

He was the one who made the first move -- I was already in love with him but never said anything because of my respect for the Catholic religion and for him as a Priest, though when I met him I didn't know that he was a Priest.

He was the agressor. He is not in the US and we met while working on a Human Rights project. He is a missionary in a third world country and is also from that country - he grew up with a severe reality about life and how the world works. But

if he didn't get it then, he certainly got it after starting his missionary work.

I don't think that he had any idea what it would be like to be celibate and never marry. He was kept from even meeting girls in the seminary. He told me that he had met me before he was ordained. He was in a 'victorian environment' with regard to women and sex. But somehow, he survived it.

Because he is on the road much of the time and has never had any real time off, he is getting burnt out. Just recently with me, he has realized that he can have some companionship and a decent relationship with a woman, despite the facts of his seminary education. He is poor and is kept poor because of where he works. But he is so good to the people in his parish that he gives his possessions away - jackets, watches, cell phones, food, etc.

Even though now we are half-way around the world from each other, we talk every day, sometimes twice a day and he has finally planned a vacation - we plan to spend two weeks together as soon as I can get the money together to get there. The I plan to help him get to the US to get his Masters degree.

He is an extraordinary man, I admire him greatly for his work and who he is. It was God's plan for us to meet - it had to be because neither of us planned to fall in love with each other. We both tried, without success to stop it. I have been married(my husband died some years ago)so I know what it is like to love but I love this man more and differently than anyone I've ever met.

I and he are both well-aware of the road ahead of us and we are prepared to deal with it as much as anyone can be prepared for it. I wanted him to be certain of his feelings and make the decision first - he again made the first move and calls our planned vacation together 'our honeymoon'.

Our future is uncertain but so then, is everyone's. I don't plan to ask him to give up being a Priest. It will be his choice and his decision. I don't plan to give him up either. He is aware that his life could become difficult and if he is forced to make a decision, I am prepared to accept it, but I won't give him up voluntarily.

It is time for the Church to wake up and smell the coffee - to change. If he could be married, we would not be going off on a vacation together but I would be there helping him with his ministry. I would be an asset to him and his ministry and he has even said that I would. He knows how much I care about his people and about helping the poor.

From the articles I've read and those whom I've known, I think most men who have left the priesthood to get married would have stayed if they had been allowed to be married priests. I also think that the continued adherence to an archaic rule has brought the Church to a situation that it has been forced to accept a great deal less than the best men to admit to the priesthood in recent years when they could have accepted wives who would be an asset to the ministry. The choice of celibacy should be optional for all priests.

April 7, 2010 2:01 AM

Henry said...

Anonymous,

I admire both of your courage and ability to see that your love is a gift from God, regardless of the church's insistence upon mandated celibacy. God and his gift of love are not controlled by the church, especially when their teaching is as irrational and non-biblical as mandated celibacy is. Your comment about mandatory celibacy greatly shrinking the pool of gifted and qualified people for priestly ministry is so very true. It is creating a crisis situation in the church. Celebrate your love with enthusiasm and thank God for his gift. There are many places he can minister with you at his side and with God's abundant blessings. Too bad the Catholic church cannot give you the same. One of the best views of Catholicism is in the rear view mirror.

April 7, 2010 6:23 AM

Anonymous said...

What I can't understand is why I so often read that priests who have resigned, married, and joined another denomination who accepts the marriage and allows the priest to have a ministry--but they still say they wish the RC church would change its views so they can go back to it? Why? The church was the oppressor, made the priest unhappy enough with its regulations so that he left and wasn't that understanding or supportive at his leaving. Not only that, but the church's antiquated and not very reasonable stance on many things besides mandatory celibacy would still exist even if it changed the rule there. The best move I ever made in my life was when, as a youngster, I vowed to myself "I am not going to let this institution control me or force me to lead a life of guilt." I voluntarily left the RC church and I would never return as a member of something I consider to have all the earmarks of a cult, starting with the reliance upon an infallible leader.

August 30, 2010 3:45 PM

Henry **said...**

Anonymous,

I appreciate your comments and commend you for your ability to not allow the Catholic Church to control you or inflict guilt upon you. The reason some of us continue to strive to promote reform within Catholicism, even though we have moved on with our lives, is because we desire see the Church become more inclusive for the sake of generations of Catholics to come, as well as for those within the Church who would like to see reform occur. Many have shaken the dust from their feet and no longer wish to engage the institution because of the pain it has caused and that is understandable. Yet, others find themselves compelled to promote reform, even though they are a voice in the wilderness.

August 30, 2010 5:59 PM

Rosanne Dingli **said...**

It is for reasons much deeper than that, Henry.

If our tennis club did not want us to take our children along on the weekends, and made us dress a certain way, or not eat certain things, we would shift to another club... why, even consider playing basketball instead! We would not stay on, and go through enormous privations and discomfort, would we? Why don't Catholic priests shift, and join a denomination where they can have the best of both worlds?

It is because of cultural and psychological conditioning about what they really consider the RC church to be: it is deep and almost immutable.

You saw the light, but many cannot because they take their role as Sheep rather literally and soulfully. I am not making fun or taking it lightly: but it is so. It is an ingrained regard that places the RC church not only above themselves but also above all other churches.

Moving to a more enlightened or flexible 'club' is not an option for them. They would rather suffer and 'sin' than shift and be comfortable elsewhere. This is of great interest and mystery to me and others like me.

If one thinks so many of the church's edicts are so unrealistic, why follow them? Why stay on? Some people would rather battle and argue and write and debate about contraception, celibacy, female ordination... when they are all available elsewhere! Can you see how some people are right to feel perplexed at such behaviour? What sort of a hold does the RC church have that makes these people immobile?

October 31, 2010 10:40 PM

Henry said...

Rosanne,

It is difficult to understand the hold the Catholic Church has on priests unless you have turned your heart and soul over to it by way of ordination. I once counseled a woman who had been involved in a cult and couldn't help but see similarities. This is not to say the celibate priesthood is a destructive cult, but the emotional hold it has on priests is similar. I wrote about why it is had to leave on my website and you can find it at this link: http://www.leavingthepriesthood.com/#anchor_113

November 1, 2010 6:20 AM