The Celibate Addiction

By Robert H. Kippley

I was ordained in 1983 for the Diocese of Bismarck, North Dakota and worked for the past fifteen years in parish ministry. During the past several years, I found the aloneness and isolation which mandatory celibacy requires to preclude what I feel is necessary for a balanced emotional life. I have found mandatory celibacy to be a church policy maintained by celibate male clerics, who are addicted to the power and ecclesiastical control it has created for them. This addiction has eclipsed reason and has little to do with the will of God. It should have been dispensed with years ago. I no longer believe it is necessary to make sacrifices that enable this addiction.

I recently transitioned out of ministry and wish to thank the CORPUS community in Chicago for their encouragement and support. It is wonderful to talk with people who understand.

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“My name is Bob and I’m addicted to celibate male power.” Fifteen years ago, I stood before my bishop as an idealistic young man wanting to serve the Lord and the Church. To do so meant I must answer in the affirmative that I would obey my bishop, pray, never experience marital life or have a family. I was exhorted to model my life after the Lord’s cross and was assured that spiritual rewards were promised to those who practiced self-sacrifice. I learned to avoid discussion about controversial Church issues for the sake of harmony, brotherhood and loyalty. I declared my promises and officially became a member of a celibate male community and the priesthood of Jesus Christ. In addition to academic, pastoral and spiritual preparation for ministry, I also developed the mentality necessary to become a member of an ecclesiastical system which is emotionally and spiritually addicted to celibate male power.

My fifteen years in ministry were fulfilling, but often lonely. Walking back to an empty rectory after celebrating a joyous marriage was not easy. I do remember thanking God for celibacy after counseling couples having marital difficulties and was often reminded that living in matrimonial harmony is not easy. However, one important aspect marriage offers, is the ability for a couple to reflect truth to one another. Often in a marriage, confrontation of non-loving speech and behavior occurs and one is held accountable. For a celibate living alone, there is no one to challenge harmful speech or action until it becomes quite obvious. A spouse would never tolerate behavior some celibates consider normal. The daily self-sacrifice and altruism necessary for marriage and family life far surpasses that required of celibates.

Traditional spirituality requires the celibate to sacrifice marriage and family for higher spiritual goals. Healthy psychol-
recovering celibate male power addict, I knew what they were really teaching—it had nothing to do with the Eucharist and everything to do with power addiction. These priests were using the Eucharist as a tool to maintain clerical control and limit the legitimate involvement of the laity.

Because archconservative theology such as this is becoming more prevalent, we have an image of the Church backing fearfully into the “new millennium,” unable to change, and looking for answers to contemporary problems in a predictable Church of a bygone era.

In today’s Church, there are many wonderful bishops and priests who are torn between ultraconservative teaching and the integrity of their personal beliefs and pastoral sensitivities. This puts them in the difficult position of privately disagreeing with many Church teachings and publicly attempting to uphold them. Unfortunately, this tension increases when priests who have worked toward “opening the windows of the Church” are replaced by those wishing to close them. These archconservative tendencies seem to be a reactionary movement among those who seek security in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. This results in emphasis on authority and obedience in an attempt to remove ambiguity and create predictability. Young priests, eager to please authority and find acceptance, are often easy prey to archconservative teaching, which attempts to externalize security through rigid ecclesiastical control and policies. It will be interesting to see the theological and ecclesiastical changes these priests will experience when they become more confident in ministry and find greater internal personal security.

A sign of an emotionally mature priest is his ability to differentiate between their personal life and ministerial life. Mandatory celibacy makes healthy differentiation nearly impossible, because it severely intrudes upon one’s personal life. A more healthy system would be less intrusive by offering celibacy as an option. Optional celibacy would recognize the holy benefits of marital and family relationships which foster emotional development and fulfillment. One cannot help but wonder why an institution would want this sort of control over a person’s life. What kind of an institution deprives their leaders of the warmth and joy of marital intimacy, companionship and children? What kind of institution requires their leaders to grow old alone with few, if anyone, to cry at their funeral? What kind of institution demands that their leaders have no one living close enough to them to mirror truth and challenge them to healthy emotional development and behavior? Mandatory celibacy makes about as much sense as requiring one to cut off an arm or leg for the Kingdom. Arms and legs are good and necessary for a healthy life, and need not be sacrificed. Likewise, so is marriage and family. Past and present theology justifying the addiction to mandatory celibacy can no longer withstand the scrutiny of sound psychology or healthy spirituality. Optional celibacy is another matter.

Mandatory celibacy arose during the middle ages and out of a dark period in the Church’s history. Marital intercourse was perceived by many as a defiling act rendering the priest unfit to celebrate mass. It also entailed a certain amount of misogyny. Not only were women declared unfit for ordination, celibacy prohibited them from having any significant influence upon the ordained leader. Present understanding of human sexuality and the dignity of women renders these reasons for mandatory celibacy obsolete. Other teaching refers to the priest as “wedded” to the Church with the Church as his spouse.

However, the Church is the bride of Christ, not the bride of the priest. The priest acting “in persona Christi” is often invoked by those wishing to exclude women and married men from ordination, because Christ was both single and male. Yet, most of the apostles Jesus called were married, including Saint Peter, whose mother-in-law Jesus healed. Several women were also within His inner circle of disciples.

Church officials are quick to point out that their teaching is based on tradition, not only scripture. However, they need to be reminded that tradition must be rooted in scripture. Also, the priest is not representing the human Jesus of Nazareth, but rather the resurrected, glorified Christ who transcends all limiting human categories, including male and celibate. Placing the priest “in persona Christi” has been a convenient way for power addicts to keep women at a distance from the altar and from having any significant influence upon a priest. About all that is left to support mandatory celibacy is the empowerment it gives bishops to move unmarried priests wherever needed. On the other hand, if celibacy was optional, bishops would have an increase in available ministers and more options for...
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filling vacancies. What about the claim that a priest would be torn between ministry and family? On the contrary, the ministry of married priests would be enhanced by their first-hand experiences of marriage and family life. Thousands of married Protestant clergy do an excellent job of ministry everyday, not to mention the hours their wives also give in service to the church. What about divorce? The Church would be more understanding and gentle with divorced and remarried people, if some married clergy were numbered among them.

It is increasingly evident that mandatory celibacy creates a more conducive atmosphere for meeting the intimacy needs of gay priests than of those who are straight. It is difficult for a gay priest to grasp the depth of loneliness many straight priests experience. A gay priest can have dinner, vacation and even live with his significant friend. A straight priest raises eyebrows if he is seen just having lunch with a woman. Gay priests do wonderful ministry. However, it is time to discuss openly and honestly the fact that mandatory celibacy is much more hospitable to the emotional and intimacy needs of gay priests than straight priests. This is especially true in a society where open gay relationships are not tolerated.

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Presently, the addicted system requires Church officials to close parishes, leave people without Eucharist and overwork bishops and priests, rather than change policies regarding who qualifies for ordained leadership. Although this addiction maintains celibate ecclesiastical authority and power, it hinders mission and the Church's ability to call itself universal.

I remember a teacher saying that those who have left ordained ministry first stopped praying and then lost their faith. It is amazing to what extent an addict will go to manipulate and interpret reality to fit their paradigm. If there is any faith lost, it is loss of faith in the addicted system. It takes a tremendous amount of faith and courage to leave ordained ministry. In the last few decades, thousands of priests have left. Unfortunately, many have been excommunicated, because they chose wholesome love, companionship and children. One would think that the celibate male power addicts who dispense these ecclesiastical penalties would have learned from the excommunication of Galileo, that the limits of truth and reality are not established by ecclesiastical decree. Galileo looked beyond the imposed parameters of the addicted system and viewed reality from another perspective. It made all the difference in the world.

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