

The Trouble with Celibacy

In Africa, Catholicism's best growth market, many priests have little use for Rome's chastity mandate.

By [Lisa Miller](#) | Newsweek Web Exclusive

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In 1998 a Roman Catholic nun named Marie McDonald wrote a brief and painful summary of her concerns to her colleagues and superiors. It was labeled "strictly confidential." She was worried, she said, about the sexual abuse of nuns by Roman Catholic priests in Africa

The memo—titled "[The Problem of the Sexual Abuse of African Religious in Africa and in Rome](#)" was concise. "Sexual harassment and even rape of sisters by priests and bishops is allegedly common," it said. Sisters, financially dependent on priests, occasionally have to perform sexual favors in exchange for money. McDonald analyzed the causes of this widespread violation of chastity vows and then made this plea: "The time has come for some concerted action." According to [the National Catholic Reporter](#), which made McDonald's memo public in 2001, Vatican officials did take steps to rectify the problem, but publicly, their stance was chillingly familiar. "The problem is known and is restricted to a limited geographical area," [said Joaquin Navarro-Valls](#), the Vatican spokesman at the time. This is an isolated incident, in other words; we've got it under control.

Even as new cases of child sexual abuse by clergy emerge each day in Europe and the United States, abuse in the regions where Catholicism is growing fastest—Latin America, Asia, and, especially, Africa—are still largely ignored. In the West, the focus has been on the violation of minors, and on the role of celibacy in engendering this problem. In Africa, the problem is somewhat more complex. Though many good priests do adhere to their chastity vows, says the Rev. Peter Schineller, a Jesuit priest who has spent 20 years in Africa, sex between consenting or semi-consenting adults is commonplace. Transgression against chastity vows by priests run the gamut from harassment all the way to fathering children; it's not criminal necessarily, but it's certainly against doctrine. "The violations are huge," says Schineller. As the Roman Catholic hierarchy continues to crow over its success and vitality in the global south—the growth rate in Africa and Asia has been about 3 percent a year, twice the rate worldwide—the African church may put mandatory clerical celibacy to its harshest test yet.

Sexual coercion is just part of the story. The 2001 investigation by the *National Catholic Reporter* uncovered three separate reports of sexual abuse of religious sisters by priests. The story described priests raping religious sisters and then paying for their abortions; sisters fearing to travel in cars with priests for fear of rape; sisters appealing to bishops for help

only to be told to go away. "Even when they are listened to sympathetically," wrote McDonald, "nothing seems to be done."

Much less well documented is a broader problem: priests with unofficial "wives." In Africa, "there's a tremendous problem with the vow of chastity in regard to women," says Schineller. "Statistics are hard to get, but it's a reality. Bishops are sometimes involved with it, but mostly they simply have not faced it. It's kind of a hidden thing. Laypeople want priests, so they put up with the priest having a friend." About four years ago, Schineller worked with the bishops of Nigeria to produce a pamphlet warning parish priests about the dangers of violating their chastity vows. "There are consequences for all of this," he said.

Schineller believes that priests all over the world fail to maintain their celibacy—more, he says, than anyone wants to admit—but that Africa presents priests with a unique set of problems. In Africa, parents have a higher social status than childless adults. "To be a man in Africa—it varies from culture to culture—but it is expected that you will have children and a family. To be a celibate male is not a high value." Also, he adds, priests are often very isolated: they get lonely. "Priests are separated, living out in the bush. Family expectations are high, temptations are strong." And women, as Marie McDonald put it in her top-secret document, hold an "inferior position." "It seems," she wrote, "that a sister finds it impossible to refuse a priest who asks for sexual favors." (It's easy to imagine that holds true as well for women who are not nuns.)

Nuns hold a unique place in this sexual landscape. In a universe where AIDS is widespread, sex with nuns is thought to be safe; some imagine it might even have positive, healing powers. Priests who might have visited prostitutes see religious sisters as a healthy alternative. "One of the most dangerous myths in history," adds Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Penn State, "was this: if you were suffering from a serious sexual disease, sex with a virgin would cure it. That had awful consequences."

The Vatican has known about these sins and crimes for some time. When Benedict XVI traveled to Africa in 2005, for example, he addressed the question of celibacy explicitly. He urged the bishops there to "open themselves fully to serving others as Christ did by embracing the gift of celibacy."

Indeed, Benedict holds celibacy so high that last year he excommunicated a Zambian priest, the Rev. Luciano Anzanga Mbewe, for being married. Mbewe now heads a breakaway sect of married Catholic priests in Uganda called the Catholic Apostolic National Church, according to *The New York Times*. "The creation of the splinter church underscored the increasingly vexing problem of enforcing celibacy for Roman Catholic priests in Africa, which has the world's fastest-growing Catholic population but where there have been several cases of

priests living openly with women and fathering children," the *Times* wrote. One wonders at the priorities of a man who failed to defrock a priest in Wisconsin who molested **hundreds of children** but acted so decisively in the case of one who married a consenting adult.

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