

Doomed love affair led priest to suicide

Father Sean Seddon

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By: Ruth Gledhill, Religion Correspondent Section: Home news

A ROMAN Catholic priest who fell in love with a teacher committed suicide by throwing himself under a train, it was disclosed yesterday.

Father Sean Seddon , 38, former parish priest of St Mary's in Abertillery, Gwent, threw himself on a railway line last September after being treated for depression, the inquest into his death was told yesterday.

Earlier, he had bought a can of petrol and had intended to douse himself with it and set himself alight.

According to local residents, he had fallen in love with a teacher who became pregnant, and his death came after he learnt that she had lost the baby. Villagers refused to divulge the woman's name.

One said: "This has been a tragedy for all of us who knew and loved Fr Seddon, but most particularly for this young woman. She has lost the man she loved, her baby and her job. She needs all the support we can give her."

The inquest, at Tewkesbury, was told that a psychiatrist had diagnosed a "reactive depression" but did not think Fr Seddon was suicidal. His love affair was not referred to in court. No relatives or church officials appeared and all evidence was heard in the form of statements read aloud.

The inquest was told that Fr Seddon had been adopted as a baby and grew up in Chepstow, Gwent. He was "a great walker and sportsman", entered a Catholic seminary on leaving school and was ordained 14 years ago.

Father Terence Burke, of the Servants of the Paraclete at a rehabilitation centre near Stroud, which treats Catholic priests for alcohol and sexual

problems, described Fr Seddon's last days in a statement read to the court.

"We would go out together and we spoke a lot about his troubles. It was clear he was suffering from severe depression and found it difficult to come to terms with his problems."

"On his last day with us, I was with Sean a great deal. In the morning he received a letter from someone in his former parish related to his difficulties. After reading it he was devastated. He was full of remorse and self-accusation," the statement said.

Fr Seddon's father, Donald Seddon, said the death was a devastating blow to the family. "We have not come to terms with it".

The Law of Celibacy must Change

A plea by Jan Curry, the woman with whom Father Sean Seddon had fallen in love.

I call for an end to mandatory celibacy and a re-evaluated priesthood.

I feel very nervous, but I also know how important it is that I speak out. I feel I am speaking on behalf of all those men and women for whom the present model of priesthood brings nothing but pain; I also speak in memory of Sean Seddon, and our baby Chloe.

Because of my life story, I am particularly concerned with the call in the WE ARE CHURCH Declaration, for a priesthood where celibacy and marriage are optional.

Devaluing woman

I will start by looking at the bigger picture of what the present system of priesthood is saying to the world, the Church, to women, to me.

The present model has an intrinsic message about the value of woman. Not only can she not be a priest, she cannot have an intimate relationship with a priest, cannot be his wife. The message I receive is that 'holy things' are not the domain of women. It is institutionalised misogyny.

Hand in hand with this goes a dysfunctional theology (if that's the right word) of sexuality. The history of the Church's understanding of sexuality is characterised by gross ignorance, misconceptions and stereotypes.

Running parallel to this is the law of mandatory celibacy for priests, a matter of discipline not doctrine. Implicit in this law is that virginity is a superior state to marriage.

It is important to emphasise that it is compulsory celibacy for priests I attack, and not celibacy freely chosen and lovingly lived.

Compulsory celibacy and priesthood are tied together because of a dualistic view of the world. Men are orderly, rational, spiritual. Women are base, fleshy, corruptible, and therefore must not be part of the life of the holy man. In the Old Testament tradition a woman was untouchable for seven days during menstruation. Any man coming into contact with her at this time would become ritually unclean. With the enforcement of mandatory celibacy, the untouchability of women has become life long for Catholic priests.

Priests' attitudes to women

What I have mentioned so far are big issues, not always at the forefront of the minds of men or women, or priests, or those training to be priests, but the whole culture and background leads to an immature, and in some cases a rather twisted attitude towards women. This is manifested in the many ways that priests relate to women. I will concentrate on two main areas that I know personally.

The first is the shadow side of celibacy; quite simply that is when priests

hide behind the veil of celibacy and abuse women. They use them for sex, they abuse their positions of power, especially when women are at vulnerable times of their lives; they father children and refuse to take responsibility for them. I'm not pulling these examples out of thin air, I know personally women in all these situations.

If the priest's actions are 'discovered', then the Bishops' reaction is invariably to move him, or in some cases her.

The hypocrisy is sickening. When Sean told his so-called priest friends about his desire to marry me, on more than one occasion he was told "see her, sleep with her, but for God's sake you don't have to marry her". It seems the ultimate sin is to want to form a public partnership with a woman, and treat her as your equal.

The second area, and one that I relate to most, is what David Rice calls the sorrowing. This is when there is a long term commitment in a relationship between a priest and his lover, and decisions are being made about the future and marriage.

I do not think it too strong to say that compulsory celibacy is evil. To be human is to be in relationship, as God as Trinity is in relationship. It is an inalienable human right to marry and found a family. Catholic priests are in a unique position. They are NOT choosing between two lovers, that popular analogy of the unfaithful man discarding one lover for another (or more common is the image of the woman in the relationship being like a woman having an affair with a married man).

I can never understand the ignorance of this thinking. Marriage is about an intimate relationship with another human being, priesthood is about serving the community. The sorrowing wanting to marry and wanting to remain a priest, feeling strongly called to both, leads to despair, heartbreak, breakdown and suicide. For both.

The woman's despair in all this is equal to the priest's. The very fact that

there has to be a choice is wrong and its existence says some very warped things about women, sex and God.

The very fact that there has to be a choice meant that Sean, the extrovert, generous, strong, loving, laughing man I had loved, and who had loved me for nearly ten years, crippled with guilt, despair and hopelessness, left his bed in the early hours of a September morning, lay down on a dark and lonely railway line and waited to be killed.

He is one of a growing number of suicide statistics of priests who struggle with compulsory celibacy.

Treatment of married priests

And what about the priests who do marry ? This is where true vindictiveness against priests and their wives often comes into play. Often those who leave are rubbished by those who used to be 'brothers'. Married priests have been called anything from 'Judas' to 'traitor' and 'boils that need to be lanced'.

It is ironic that those who marry in registry offices are effectively excommunicated from receiving the sacraments, while those who stay in the priesthood, no matter how promiscuous, not only receive the sacraments but are considered sacerdotally worthy of administering them.

Human rights

This issue is rightly seen by many as a human rights issue, a matter of justice. Large numbers of Catholics have internalised the Church's teachings on social justice, as well as the freedom and dignity of every individual - and have directed them not to the world at large, but to the Church's own internal structures.

In this century theology has had a change of heart, indeed a move away from the head to the heart, and the body too. A world view that takes into

account not just the life of the soul but also the life of the body, the earth and the environment.

Today we are part of a new more confident culture, of 'speaking up' and 'speaking out'. Of sharing stories and doing theology together that grows out of experience. Isn't that exactly what we are doing here today?

This is not easy, and those who feel threatened will use defence mechanisms, by denying reality and lived experiences they think they can coerce acceptance of fantasy. **BUT WE ARE NOT WILLING TO BE PART OF IT.** We don't buy the fantasy, we won't hide behind the empty façade of compulsory celibacy.

Today, in memory of Sean and in solidarity with millions of Catholics around the world, we call for an end to mandatory celibacy, and a re-evaluation of priesthood.