

A View From the Priesthood

It's bigotry to blame celibacy for church problems

BEATRICE DE PLANNISSELES, THE CHATELAIN in Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie's documentary history of 14th-century Montaillou in southern France, insisted that she preferred priests as lovers because priests were more tender and sensitive. Her lovers included four priests (one set up a bed inside the parish church), two husbands and several laymen. Her story typifies the history of clerical celibacy: it was honored more in some times and places than in other times and places. For much of the history of the peasant priesthood in Europe, the barely literate cleric who worked in the fields beside the members of the flock needed a woman to survive; one set of hands was not enough. In some dioceses the matter was handled discreetly: a tax was imposed on "married" priests—a tax for the woman and an additional tax for each child.

The married Greek Catholic clergy prove that celibacy is not essential to the priesthood. The rule could be changed without the need to change any Catholic doctrine. As a layman remarked to me, "I don't care who a priest sleeps with after 10 o'clock at night, so long as he's a priest until then."

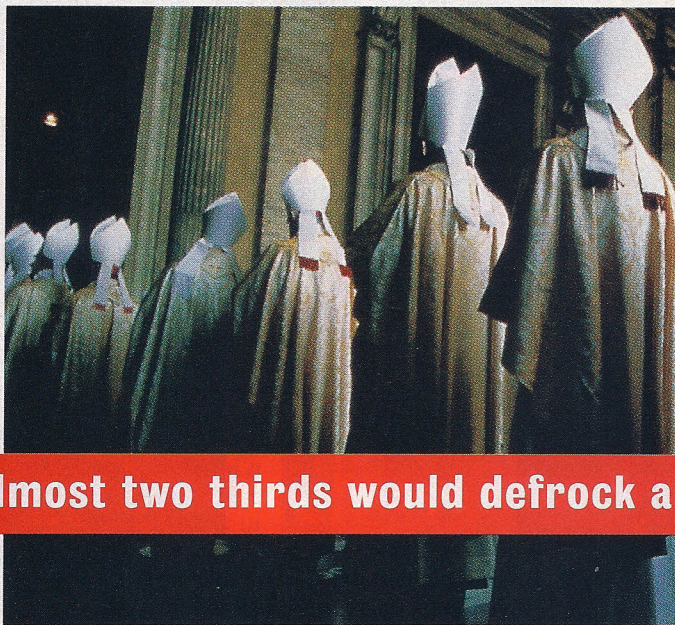
Nonetheless, it is intellectually dishonest Catholic-bashing to blame celibacy for the problems of the church or the priesthood. The lower clergy (parish priests) are as likely to reject the Vatican's rigid approach to marital sex as are the laity. Priests do not have the emotional maturity of 13-year-olds, as ex-priest A. W. Richard Sipe has argued. Studies of representative samples of priests (which his samples are not) show that they are as mature and as capable of interpersonal intimacy as are married men of similar age and education. Nor are priests desperately unhappy or unfulfilled. Psychologist Thomas Nestor of Boston, in a study of Chicago priests, found that they were *more* likely to be satisfied with their work and their careers and their lives than a comparable sample of laymen. Priests may be the happiest men in America (or perhaps only the least unhappy). The shortage of priestly vocations is the result not of celibacy but of the lack of recruiting by the two principal recruitment officers—priests and mothers. The notion that celibacy is any more difficult in America today than it was 40 years ago, when my generation went into the priesthood, is hilarious. It's always been difficult and never impossible, not if a man is happy in his work. Most priests still try to honor their pledge.

Finally, as someone who has been warning the church about the sexual-abuse problem since 1986, I insist that it is intolerable anti-Catholic bigotry to blame the present crisis of sexual abuse of young people by priests on celibacy. A certain proportion of priests (3.27 percent in the Archdiocese of Chicago) abuse children not because they are sexually starved but because their "love maps"—their

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objects of sexual desire—have been vandalized in childhood experiences of their own. Pedophilia, in whatever form, would be the result of celibacy if, and *only if*, it were not also a problem among others working in the professions that have access to children. Most pedophiles are married men. If the priest pedophiles were married they would continue to prey on children, perhaps their own children. Nor can the pedophile problem be blamed on "unhealthy" attitudes toward sex among Roman Catholics that have been created by celibacy. In fact, as research done by the National Opinion Research Center and by The Gallup Organization demonstrates, Catholics have sex more often, are more playful in their sex lives and enjoy sex more than Protestants. They also are more tolerant of homosexuals.

In the present context, I do not intend to argue either for or against celibacy. I object rather to its becoming a scapegoat for every problem in the priesthood and in the church. I charge church leaders—all the way up to the top—with failure to make the case for it by any other argument than, "This is the law. Period." My research shows, for example, that a confidant relationship between a celibate priest and a married woman produces a payoff in marital happiness and sexual fulfillment



GIANNI GIANSAANTI—SYGMA

Almost two thirds would defrock abusive priests

In ceremonial single file, bishops arrive for a Vatican synod

for both her and her husband. On the basis of my personal experience of 40 years in the priesthood, I strongly support celibacy. I also support the ordination of women, tomorrow if possible. Finally I argue for a "priest" corps, like the Peace Corps, in which men (and I hope women) make commitments to the priesthood for limited terms. It would be an obvious adaptation to changing life expectancy: a man will be a priest now for 50 years instead of 12, as was the case only a century ago.

If someone burns out after a couple of terms or can no longer stand teenage noise or wants to start a family of his own, let him go forth in dignity and gratitude. Why assume that the priesthood in this age of long life expectancy must be a lifetime vocation? Anyone who can put up with teenage noise after 40 either is weird or has special gifts of nature and grace. It is not fair to demand this of all priests. That I still enjoy working with noisy teenagers, young men and women (the latter more) may say something about me. Or about a certain kind of celibacy.

ANDREW GREELEY, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, is a professor of social science at the University of Chicago and the National Opinion Research Center. His most recent novel, "Fall From Grace," is about the sexual-abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church.