

Putting the celibacy debate into context



The courageous Bishop Daley of Derry, protector of the innocent on Bloody Sunday when British soldiers shot dead 26 unarmed civilians conducting an orderly protest in 1972, has said something everyone in the Catholic Church, from the hierarchy to the occasional Mass goer, knows: The rule of celibacy for the diocesan clergy is strangling the Catholic Church in many parts of the world. Dr Daley is the latest to say so, but perhaps the most well-known to nail his colours to the mast.

While the decline in clergy is most marked in Europe and the US and has always been in evidence in Latin America, the challenge is nothing new to the Church in Asia. In many countries, supply of clergy is nowhere near meeting the demand for their services.

The Philippines has an average of one priest per 6,000 Catholics compared with one priest per 2,000 in the US and Australia, where the crisis of supply and demand for clergy is a regular subject of discussion. Other countries in Asia such as Thailand, Vietnam and Korea do not have the problem as acutely and have their own local and culturally based motives for turning counter to the worldwide cycle.

On a global scale and despite claims to the contrary, the situation is only getting worse. While the gross number of clergy may be increasing slowly, it's at less than half the rate of growth of the Catholic population.

Why is, as Dr Daley says, celibacy at the heart of the problem? Changes in cultural attitudes to the human body, the technology of sex, smaller families, the death of fear as a motivator for religious compliance and changes within the Church's own understanding of marriage have all combined to pose questions for celibacy that the sexual abuse scandals involving a very small percentage of clerics have only reinforced. Altogether, these pressures make celibacy an option few even consider, let alone embrace.

And what this does is eat away at the heart of the Catholic Church, because it means a diminishing capacity to provide the essential element to sustaining the life of the community: Mass.

The most authoritative voice in the Church – a Council, and in this case Vatican II, which opened its first session 49 years ago – described *Mass* as the Eucharist as the "source and summit of the Church's life." For Mass, you need celebrants. They're priests and under the law prevailing in the Western or Roman Church, to be a priest, mostly, you have to be celibate.

I say "mostly" because if you're a married Anglican priest who opposes the ordination of women, you stay straight in to becoming a Roman Catholic priest. What is the logic behind that and its implications for the celibacy of Catholic priests? Don't ask me. I leave it to your speculation on the unintended consequences of actions by Church leadership.

This year, the powers that be in the International liturgical life of the Church have introduced changes to the language of the texts used at Mass in English. This seems a sensible preoccupation with whether the text is faithful to the Latin original when the central issue facing the whole English-speaking Catholic Church and beyond is that in the foreseeable future Mass will not be available in any language to a majority of Catholics in the English-speaking world.

The elephant in the room is the decline in clerical numbers, which has been under way for forty years as celibate priests leave in parallel with a decline in numbers joining the seminary. The number of those joining now will probably never match the need.

The reasons for why clerical celibacy was made mandatory in the Latin Rite (i.e. Roman Catholic), as opposed to the Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Lebanese, Syrian, Armenian, etc. rites are well known. It all came down to property and what we might today call insurance. In the event of the death of a diocesan priest, who got his property and who looked after his family? The answer was no answer, just a remnant of the question. The Pope of the time – Gregory – insisted that priests couldn't marry and believed that this would be an end to the issue.

Celibacy is a bit like forcing monogamous marriage, or parenthood for that matter. Delivery of any of them is a wonderful achievement but those doing the delivering know there is more art than science involved, and we often deliver some bad art. All are a splendid ideal, which we that human beings don't always live up to.

The law imposing celibacy on the diocesan clergy is something taken out of the context from which it proceeded, the monasteries, and is borrowed from a lifestyle and commitment that has many more checks and balances.

Monasteries provide things not available to a diocesan priest: a stable, residential community, provision of income to match current or foreseeable expenses and care in times of bad health or stress and strain. These are all things provided for in one way or another in monastic living. Not so for diocesan clergy. For most, if not all, celibacy was not chosen but accepted as part of the package to be taken on if they wanted to be able to be part of the service to people that being a priest bestows. Diocesan priests have to make material provision for themselves.

The reward of celibacy faithfully lived is great and it's most likely that reward which keeps a lot of priests going. Being celibate says to those who seek him out that they have put their bodies on the line to be available for service. That's why there's so much trust placed in priests and why, rightly, when that trust is betrayed, the perpetrators have done the unforgivable by anyone but God.

But what brings me and most other priests I know that deepest satisfaction is the trust people have in us despite our failures and failures.

It's foolish to believe that married clergy will deliver some heavenly transformation of the Church's professional service class. The experience of non-Catholic denominations with married clergy is testament enough to that. And, in a world where married couples run a high chance of their marriages breaking up, no one can be under any illusion about the risks and challenges involved in that demanding and self-sacrificing commitment.

Married clergy will bring their own raft of problems and not even an end to sexual abuse. As is well known, the overwhelming majority of child sexual abuse occurs within families when heterosexual adults interfere with children.

But none of that is the issue. The change needs to occur for reasons that relate to what the Church is and how it should provide the sacraments. That's what Bishop Doherty and many others are saying.

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