

STUDENT ESSAY

Regnum Caelorum:

The Connatural Bond between Celibacy and Ministerial Priesthood



In his 1967 encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, Pope Paul VI laments the modern rejection of a link between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood: “Amid the modern stirrings of opinion, a tendency has also been manifested, and even a desire expressed, to

ask the Church to re-examine this characteristic institution. It is said that in the world of our time the observance of celibacy has come to be difficult or even impossible” (1). This rejection of celibacy has been carried through to our current age; and despite the efforts of Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, celibacy is still grossly misunderstood, even among the Catholic faithful. Despite doubts to the contrary, there is a connatural relationship between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood. The purpose of this essay is to show that celibacy shares an existential affinity with the ministerial priesthood and thus respond to the questions many have regarding this connatural bond.

One of the most prevalent arguments against priestly celibacy is that it is against nature “because it runs counter to lawful physical, psychic and affective needs” (SC 53). However, such a conception cheapens man, and Paul VI patently rejects this argument: “Man, created to God’s image and likeness, is not just flesh and blood; the sexual instinct is not all that he has; man has also, and pre-eminently, understanding, choice, freedom, and thanks to these powers he is, and must remain, the chief work of creation; they give him mastery over his physical, mental and emotional appetites” (53). In fact, it is celibacy that shines a light on the nature of man who was created in the image of God. Thus, Paul VI sees the reason for “dedicated celibacy” as “the choice of a closer and more complete relationship with the mystery of Christ and the Church for the good of all mankind: in this choice there is no doubt that those highest human values are

able to find their fullest expression" (54). Once the value of priestly celibacy is understood, the various theological aspects of the ministerial priesthood – its Christological, eschatological and ecclesiological dimensions – help to reinforce and evidence the connatural bond between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood.

Christological Dimension

In his *The Motherhood of the Church*, Henri de Lubac is quite right in noting that in Scripture, Christ never explicitly commands celibacy of the apostles: "It is very true that there is no metaphysical connection, nor any connection proceeding from a clear order from Christ to his apostles, which links celibacy to the priesthood in an absolute way" (357). Despite this lack of explicit instruction, de Lubac states that "it is certain that the tradition of the Church considers this bond to be beneficial for a number of reasons" (357). Concerning this bond between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood, de Lubac notes the importance of the Christological dimension which is characterized by the "imitation of Christ, [his] total exterior and interior availability" (359).

In examining the Christological significance of celibacy's relation to the ministerial priesthood, it is important to begin by recalling the fact that the ministerial priesthood is a participation in the Priesthood of Jesus Christ: "The Christian priesthood...can be understood only in the light of the newness of Christ, the Supreme Pontiff and eternal Priest, who instituted the priesthood of the ministry as a real participation in His own unique priesthood" (SC 19). When this participation is recognized, a correlation between Christ and the ministerial priesthood can be drawn. At the same time, an acknowledgment of Christ's own celibacy should be noted: "Christ remained throughout His whole life in the state of celibacy, which signified His total dedication to the service of God and men" (SC 21). Thus, inasmuch as Christ himself remained celibate, it is not difficult to carry this line of reasoning to its natural conclusion: "This deep concern between celibacy and the priesthood of Christ is reflected in those whose fortune it is to share in the dignity and mission of the Mediator and eternal Priest; this sharing will be more perfect the freer the sacred minister is from the bonds of flesh and blood" (SC 21). Therefore, an imitation of Christ's own example points to the importance of the link between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood. Thomas McGovern, in *Priestly Celibacy Today*, agrees with this assessment (McGovern 100).

It is worth briefly delving into the significance of Christ's celibacy in order to fully appreciate its radical nature: "By remaining celibate Jesus went against the socio-cultural and religious climate of his time, since in the Jewish

environment no condition was so much deprecated as that of a man who had no descendants. Yet Christ freely willed to combine the virginal state with his mission as eternal priest and mediator between heaven and earth" (McGovern 100-1). The priesthood that Jesus instituted is starkly different from the priesthood of the Old Covenant: "The priests of the Old Covenant functioned at the Temple according to a schedule; while 'on duty,' they lived at the temple to ensure ritual purity. Among other things, that meant abstaining from marital intercourse" (Stravinskias 50). Thus, the priest of the Old Covenant was a functionary. He lived a normal existence except for the occasions when he was called upon to offer sacrifice and perform various duties. In contrast, the priesthood that Jesus instituted required the offering of one's life, in imitation of Himself, the high Priest: "Jesus was a priest at the core of His being, which is to say that He did not simply function as a priest on certain occasions...rather, His entire life was an oblation given to the Father, thus uniting within Himself the roles of Victim and Priest" (Stravinskias 50).

Once we recognize the fact that Christ instituted the ministerial priesthood, it is easier to understand why the priest should model himself after Christ: "The priest, in as much as he is an *alter Christus*...finds his true identity in this intimate, personal relationship with Christ. The ontological bond which unites the priesthood to Christ is the source of priestly identity" (McGovern 101). As we have explained, the priesthood of Christ is something that is both different and new with regard to the ritual practices of the Old Testament. As evidenced by the life of Christ, the ministerial priesthood is exercised by the giving over of one's entire self: "Priesthood after the manner of Christ is not just a function; it engages the whole of man's existence. Theological reflection on this reality has left the Church to see the deep congruence of celibacy with the life of the priest, of which the virginity of Christ is the prototype and exemplar" (McGovern 101).

Eschatological Dimension

It is obvious in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus' concerns go beyond those of this world: "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (22:30). In such a way, Jesus' celibacy seems to point toward an eschatological vision: "He was quite intent on presenting Himself – and any who wanted to be a part of Him – as eschatological signs, that is, as living pointers to the age to come, wherein every human good (even married love) is subsumed into the *Summum Bonum* (the Highest Good)" (Stravinskias 50). Thus, according to Fr. Peter Stravinskias, marriage is absent in the world to come since "human beings take on an angelic aspect as they exchange their physical desires for contemplation" (53).

Therefore, in remaining celibate, aspects of this eschatological vision are anticipated by the celibacy of priests: "Celibacy...is not simply a lifestyle, it is a message – a prophetic message – that helps the human race in general and Christians in particular to remember that there is more to life than the sensual and encourages them not to get lost in the ephemeral" (Stravinskias 53).

Paul VI also noted the significance of the eschatological dimension concerning the bond between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood: "In the world of man, so deeply involved in earthly concerns and too often enslaved by the desires of the flesh, the precious and almost divine gift of perfect continence for the kingdom of heaven stands out precisely as 'a special token of the rewards of heaven'" (34). Thus, priestly celibacy points to that which transcends the temporal realm: "[Perfect continence] proclaims the presence on earth of the final stages of salvation with the arrival of a new world, and in a way it anticipates the fulfillment of the kingdom as it sets forth its supreme values which will one day shine forth in all the children of God" (SC 34). Therefore, when the People of God become too entrenched in the needs and desires of the present world, the celibate priest exists as a signpost to reorient them toward that which truly matters: "celibacy proclaims on earth the final stages of salvation...and acts as a reminder for all that we don't have here a lasting city, but are mere pilgrims on the way to our definitive homeland" (McGovern 111).

In a modern world concerned with instant gratification, it should come as no surprise that many individuals within and without the Church neither appreciate nor understand the benefits of priestly celibacy: "We are living in an era of aggravated sexuality, the repercussions of which are felt within the Church in many ways" (de Lubac 356). It is an eschatological understanding of priestly celibacy that helps to illuminate the misunderstandings that arise from a materialist and hypersexual worldview: "This witness is essential at the present time when there is so much pressure to give absolute value to concerns of the present life at the expense of the only thing that matters in the long run – our eternal salvation" (McGovern 111).

Regarding this eschatological dimension, the priest, in remaining celibate, experiences an aspect of the world to come: "The priest, as an *alter Christus*, experiences in his person a foretaste of the life of heaven by being focused solely on God; and, on the basis of his personal experience, he likewise appeals to his fellow men to follow him as He has followed Christ" (Stravinskias 54). At the same time, the eschatological aspect of priestly celibacy also links the priest closely with the Eucharist: "The Eucharistic Sacrifice, the eschatological sign *par excellence*, is similarly celebrated most fittingly by one who is himself an eschatological sign" (Stravinskias 54).

Ecclesiological Dimension

In addition to the Christological and eschatological dimensions that help to understand the connatural relationship between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood, ecclesiological considerations also serve to elucidate this relationship. With this in mind, we recall that the Church exists as Christ's bride. In such a way, the priest too weds himself to the Church: "The priest takes on a closer likeness to Christ, even in the love with which the eternal Priest has loved the Church His Body and offered Himself entirely for her sake, in order to make her a glorious, holy and immaculate Spouse" (SC 26). Thus, in giving of himself to Christ and the Church, the priest lives a life of service to the People of God: "The priest devotes himself to the service of Christ and his Mystical Body with a total dedication; in his prayer and Eucharistic life he imitates the Eternal High Priest who stands in the presence of God constantly interceding for us" (McGovern 102-3).

As Paul VI explains, by living a celibate life, the priest participates in Christ's love for the Church: "The consecrated celibacy of the sacred ministers actually manifests the virginal love of Christ for the Church, and the virginal and supernatural fecundity of this marriage, by which the children of God are born, 'not of blood, not of the will of the flesh.'" (26). In such a way, the priest does not exist for himself: "The priesthood, with its associated charism of celibacy, is a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit, not for the use of the person who receives it, but for the benefit of the whole Church" (McGovern 103).

In devoting his life to the service of Christ and His Church, the priest freely chooses celibacy: "The priest dedicates himself to the service of the Lord Jesus and of His Mystical Body with complete liberty, which is made easier by his total offering, and thus he depicts more fully the unity and harmony of the priestly life" (SC 27). Thus, a priestly vocation is not one-sided. Instead, it is through the Church that such a vocation is fostered and realized: "The priestly vocation...is not simply a subjective self-giving on the part of the individual, but also requires clear signs of a calling which only the bishop is deputed to ascertain and confirm" (McGovern 103). De Lubac also echoes this sentiment, stating that "the vocation is not simply an interior, personal affair; it implies an exterior call by the Church, and it is up to the latter to define the conditions with which she furnishes this call" (358). Insomuch as the Church mandates clerical celibacy, the priest gives himself over entirely to the Church, trusting in Her wisdom: "If I become a priest, it is not for myself, but for the service of God and men within the Church; by presuming to define for myself the conditions of this service, I am denying the Church the freedom to which she has a right by her very mission" (de Lubac 358-9).



Spiritual Paternity

Encompassing the Christological, eschatological, and ecclesial dimensions of clerical celibacy is the exercise of spiritual paternity by the celibate priest. Inasmuch as love for Christ and the Church along with living for the kingdom of God are

important for the priest, the fact that he forsakes biological children allows him to exercise a spiritual fatherhood: “the minister exercises, in a derivative way, a ‘paternal’ function: if he renounces fatherhood according to the flesh, it is in order to engender numerous sons according to the Spirit” (de Lubac 359). This spiritual paternity is tied to the priest’s gift of self that he offers through celibacy, in imitation of Christ: “Thanks to this total self-giving which the priest freely embraces, and the renunciation of a paternity according to the flesh, he receives in return a notable enrichment of ‘paternity according to the spirit.’ This renunciation is rooted in a spousal love for Christ and his Church, a love which develops in its care and concern for people” (McGovern 109-10).

In such a way, when the priest freely accepts celibacy, he is not saying “no” to that which is good so much as he is saying “yes” to a greater good to which he has been called: “Celibacy is not a statement against anything; it is a statement in favor of something – the Kingdom of God and eternal life” (Stravinskis 57). According to Federico Suarez, the celibate priest offers “a free, generous renunciation of a great, noble, pure, legitimate human love, in favor of an even more sublime, intense and immaculate love, a supernatural love of Christ Jesus, a love which so fills the heart that it leaves no room for any other, except in and through him, a love which involves refinement, extreme respect and gratitude” (161). Ultimately, celibacy demands a free choice. This choice however is not, as we have already seen, between a good and an evil: “Choosing celibacy is not a matter of opting for what is good (celibacy) over what is bad (marriage), but of considering two ‘goods’ and selecting one that is objectively better” (Stravinskis 57).

By coming to this deep love of the Lord, the priest in no way relegates the People of God to a secondary concern. In fact, it is because he has given himself over to God that he is able to live fully and totally a life of service to the faithful: "Celibacy is equivalent to loving; it has been called a service orientated love; it is love of God and of all that God loves...those who, with the help of divine grace, detach themselves from all creatures (including their own bodies) in order to rise on high and give themselves completely to Love itself, devote their entire lives to the service of others" (Suarez 161). Thus, in devoting his life to celibacy, the priest does not close himself off from the world. Instead, giving his entire self to service, he is better able to engage the world: "the heart is free to love Christ and to love others in an inclusive way. There is the joy of the apostolate, of the care of souls, of leading others to Christ and to an awareness of their Christian vocation" (McGovern 111).

Ecumenical Considerations

One final consideration concerning the link between ministerial priesthood and celibacy surrounds the differences between the Eastern and Western Churches. Regarding the practice of the Eastern Church, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that "while bishops are chosen solely from among celibates, married men can be ordained as deacons and priests. This practice has long been considered legitimate; these priests exercise a fruitful ministry within their communities" (1580). *Presbyterorum Ordinis* also reminds us that celibacy is not a *sina qua non* of priesthood: "It is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, as is apparent from the practice of the early Church and from the traditions of the Eastern Churches.... This holy synod, while it commends ecclesiastical celibacy, in no way intends to alter that different discipline which legitimately flourishes in the Eastern Churches" (16). Still, as evidenced by the fact that only celibate priests may be raised to the episcopacy, the veneration that the Eastern Church affords celibacy is obvious: "Priestly celibacy is held in great honor in the Eastern Churches and many priests have freely chosen it for the sake of the kingdom of God" (CCC 1580).

In addition to these realizations about the Church of the East, some within the Church of the West, particularly after the Second Vatican Council, began to call for the ordination of married men. However, Paul VI reaffirmed the rich tradition of the Catholic Church:

In any case, the Church of the West cannot weaken her faithful observance of her own tradition. Nor can she be regarded as having followed for centuries a path which instead of favoring spiritual richness of individual souls and of the People of God, has

in some way compromised it, or of having stifled with arbitrary juridical prescriptions, the free expression of the most profound realities of nature and of grace. (41)

Ultimately, while the Eastern and Western traditions differ in various ways, the veneration and respect for celibacy is a common thread. The link between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood is ancient, its tradition reaching back to the Apostles while growing and developing throughout the centuries: "The link between celibacy and priesthood is not something artificial or ephemeral...the celibacy of priests is not a 'superstructure' which has no basis.... It is a result of the action of the Holy Spirit and therefore a lively sign of the development of the seed which is growing into a fruitful tree" (Suarez 164).

Despite the fact that priestly celibacy has not linked the Eastern and Western Churches, its tradition is so strong that a connatural bond between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood cannot be denied, either. Christological, eschatological, and ecclesiological evidence all point to this important relationship. In fact, simply based on matters of practicality, the fact that the priest exercises spiritual paternity points to a link with celibacy. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* reminds us that through celibacy, priests "adhere to [Christ] more easily and with an undivided heart, they dedicate themselves more freely in him and through him to the service of God and men, and they more expeditiously minister to his Kingdom and the work of heavenly regeneration, and thus they are apt to accept, in a broad sense, paternity in Christ" (16). For the priest, celibacy becomes a part of his identity; and he exists as "a living sign of the world to come, by a faith and charity already made present, in which the children of the resurrection neither marry nor take wives" (PO 16).

In *Priestly Celibacy Today*, McGovern recounts the story of the Christians of Nagasaki. After the persecution of many Japanese Christians during the 17th Century, Japan closed itself off from the Western World. In 1863, a group of French missionaries came to settle in Japan. Two years later, a group of fifteen men, women, and children approached one of the priests, asking him a number of questions. It turned out that, despite the passing of two hundred years since the persecution, a small group of a few thousand Christians had managed to survive. Through the generations, this group carried the tradition that the veracity of any future missionaries could be realized in a few specific traits: "they would honor the Blessed Virgin, they would be sent by 'the great White Father of the West' (the Pope), and they would be celibates" (220). Apparently, Protestant missionaries had attempted to evangelize the region in the past; but when the Christians realized that the men were married, they knew that they were not those for whom they had been waiting. Now in conversation with this French priest however, after having their first two questions affirmed, they asked him if

he had any children: “When the little group discovered that he was a celibate Catholic priest, they bowed to the ground and thanked God” (220). This brief story serves to show the singularly unique and *connatural* bond that exists between celibacy and the ministerial priesthood. Ultimately, recalling *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the close and integral identity of celibacy with the priesthood perseveres through the ages, acting as a sign of hope both for priests and the Church: “This holy synod asks not only priests but all the faithful that they may receive this precious gift of priestly celibacy in their hearts and ask of God that he will always bestow this gift upon his Church” (16).

Brandon O’Brien
Third Year Seminarian
Diocese of Rockville Centre
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Seminary of the Immaculate Conception
Huntington, NY

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