



Gridiron games

Notre Dame kicked off its high school football season last week by beating Watkins Glen. This week's sports section previews diocesan grid teams this fall. Pages 12 and 13.

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Celibacy counters society's values

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

A recent television commercial for a situation comedy sticks in Father Thomas Valenti's mind.

"There were two guys and two women talking," recalled Father Valenti, Bishop Matthew H. Clark's special assistant for vocations. "The men said, 'When are we going to get naked, or should we leave?'"

"The message that that short commercial proclaimed is one that is proclaimed over and over again and (one) that makes it difficult to consider celibacy in the world today," the priest said. "The message is that you're expected to be sexually active."

The vows of celibacy taken by priests and men and women religious in the Roman Catholic Church stands as an anomaly in light of Western society's prevailing attitude toward sexuality.

The church continues to require celibacy among priests and religious amid calls for optional celibacy, reports of priests leaving to marry, and statistics showing declining seminary enrollments attributed, in part, to celibacy requirements.

Celibacy also has received considerable — albeit indirect — media attention in recent months as a result of sex-related church scandals. Some of these scandals have led to the resignations of Father Bruce Ritter of Covenant House, Archbishop Eugene Marino of Atlanta, and Archbishop Alphonsus Penny of St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada.

Adding to this focus on sexual issues in the Catholic Church is the recent publication of *"A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy"* written by A.W. Richard Sipe, an ex-priest who taught for 17 years at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore.

Sipe, now a psychotherapist who teaches at Johns Hopkins University, delivered an address to the American Psychological Association's Boston convention Aug. 11, in which he summarized information from the book.

In the book, Sipe estimated that 50 percent of the approximately 1,000 priests he interviewed between 1965 and 1985 had broken their vow of celibacy at least once.

The book, which also included information from interviews with 500 people who said they had been involved sexually with priests, asserts that:

- 20 percent of priests are involved in a "rather well-defined, non-celibate relationship with a woman or have a clear pattern of heterosexual behavior;"
- 10-13 percent of priests are sexually active homosexuals;
- and that only eight to 10 percent of priests approach the ideal of celibacy while an additional 40 percent of priests "are practicing celibacy sufficiently well enough to be called celibate."

In an interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Sipe cautioned that the book is not a statistical survey of priests, but an "ethnographic study," that gets inside the "culture of celibacy to get inside views."

Sipe noted, however, that he stands by the book's conclusions, and alleged that the study's results reflect situations facing priests across the country.

"This book is not anti-celibacy," Sipe said. "It's pro-celibacy. It ferrets out the internal structures of celibacy."

Dean Hoge, a sociologist at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., said he thought Sipe's projections "are about right" concerning the number of priests who had broken their vow of celibacy. Hoge added that he had consulted a number of other people familiar with such problems and that they, too, thought Sipe was on target.

At the same time, however, Hoge cautioned, "No one will ever know the exact figures for these phenomena because they are too sensitive."

The book has drawn criticism as well.

"The study is flawed," said Father Dan Tormey, voicing one of the most common criticisms of the book. "His sample were priests who were being treated for problems."

Father Tormey, who directs the Diocese of Rochester's Ministry to Priests program, acknowledged that some priests have broken their vow of celibacy, but

not necessarily in the numbers that Sipe suggests.

"My intuition says that many priests value the charism of celibacy very strongly," Father Tormey said.

Father Howard Bleichner, a staff member of the the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' committees on vocations and priestly formation, described the study as "skewed."

"It's a clinical study of a rather select group," Father Bleichner said. "One thing that's difficult about Sipe's study is that it is amassing a lot of clinical data out of which a lot of statistical data is being extrapolated, in spite of his disclaimers" that the study was not scientific in nature.

Father Benedict Groeschel, CFR, was even stronger in disagreeing with Sipe and his observations.

"It's a biased study," asserted Father Groeschel, a clinical psychologist who directs the Center for Spiritual Development in the Archdiocese of New York. "I don't think it's a complete study," said the priest, who has for the past four months been treating Archbishop Marino.

Nevertheless, the Sipe report does point to the church's challenge concerning celibacy, Father Groeschel observed.

"We live in a time of sexual revolution," Father Groeschel said. "All institutions related to sexual relationships — marriage, the family, courtship — are under extreme pressure because of the sexual revolution. Consequently, so is celibacy."

"The message around right now is sex is fun, and (this message has) kicked the hell out of the church and the family," he continued. "It isn't just the church or religion."

Indeed, defenders of the vow of celibacy link it to the vow of fidelity in marriage — a commitment, they point out, that is likewise taking a beating from the current moral climate.

"Long-term commitments are difficult to make and keep in our society," Father Bleichner observed. "There's a big question of long-term commitment and how that's understood."

Father Bleichner pointed to the U.S. divorce rate that is approaching 50 percent, noting that this pattern of broken vows leaves children without

models for commitment either in marriage or in the priesthood. "The two broad topics, sexuality and commitment, are linked together," the priest said.

In fact, in this age in which commitment seems a forgotten virtue, celibacy's strong witness value is one of its strengths, Father Valenti noted.

"It (celibacy) is obviously in today's society a sign of contradiction," Father Valenti said. "It is a witness to singleness of heart."

Father Valenti pointed out that in choosing to be celibate, the priest gives up the option of having a wife and children. Consequently, he sacrifices the kind of emotional intimacy and support that those in healthy marriages can enjoy. That sacrifice and the suffering that can result from it are part of the "sign value" of celibacy, he acknowledged.

Father Victor Bartolotta, a widower who was ordained this past June and is now serving as a priest intern at St. Joseph's Church, Penfield, also likewise pointed to the testimony of the celibate lifestyle.

"Celibacy, I think, has a tremendous sign value to the people of God," said Father Bartolotta, who is also raising his daughter, Lynn, as a single parent. "They look at me and say, 'This guy could be married again, but he's choosing to be a priest.'"

For most priests — the exceptions in this diocese are Father Bartolotta and Father Melvin Walczak, a married priest with children at home — the requirement of celibacy frees them to dedicate their lives more completely to serving the church and its people, Father Valenti noted.

But a question arises: In the process of gaining freedom from some of the responsibilities of family life, are priests not giving up insights into marriage and family that could help them in their ministry?

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