

Events spur some thoughts on celibacy

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

During the week of Oct. 21, I shall have the privilege of traveling to Assisi, Italy, to speak to 60 priests from the Diocese of Rockville Centre who will be making their annual retreat in that special city. We'll leave New York City on Oct. 21, and I'll return to Rochester on Oct. 31. The retreat in Assisi will last for five full days, and we will spend a short time in Rome before and after the retreat.

The responsibility which comes with the invitation from my friends in Rockville Centre, the work we have been doing with our Priests' Council, and the pastoral interview I have had with close to 100 of our priests in recent months have all led me to think and pray a good deal about priest-hood.

As I write early on this Tuesday morning, I do so with a deep sense of respect for my brother priests, their daily, faithful work on behalf of all of us and the spirit of sacrifice and other-centeredness they bring

to their ministry. I see it in some form or other every day, and hardly a day passes when some one of you does not stop me to say something positive about one or another of our priests. They work long hours for short pay. The expectations placed on them are high, and the work that they do is too often taken for granted.

I suppose I am the more deeply conscious of their circumstances in the light of the sad stories that have held such high profile in recent months. We have read a good deal about Father Bruce Ritter and Archbishop Eugene Marino. Now one of the cable channels is promoting a movie based on the sexual abuse of young boys by a priest.

If all of that were not enough, we recently read the report on the findings of A.W. Richard Sipe who states that a high percentage of priests do not remain faithful to their promise of celibacy. In that particular instance, what got very little play was the fact that Sipe's base was a group of priests who had sought therapy precisely to deal with their personal issues.

What do we make of all of this? Are our

priests a group of dishonest people? Is a life of celibacy valid and worthy? Or is it impossible in this day and age except for a very small number? Are we placing the centrality of the Eucharist in our life in jeopardy by our insistence on mandatory celibacy when the data indicates that we would have an abundance of priests if they were able to marry?

I do not know the answers to all of these questions. I am not sure I even know all of the questions, but I do wish to share with you the following observations:

- Our priests are as fine a group of men as you will ever want to meet. They are well-educated, gifted and generous. We all have our faults and we, like everyone else, are capable of bruising and hurting others. Priests and bishops are helped by the feedback of people — when we do well and when we do poorly.

- The vast majority of priests I have ever known are deeply honest people who work hard to do the best they can to honor their promise of celibacy. Some of us fail sometime. That means neither that celibacy is silly or impossible or that those who fail are dishonest people. That circumstance speaks more of real human beings who sometimes fall short. Is there much uncommon or very new in that?

- We can make too much noise about sex in the church. It's important, yes, and its expression should be free and mature, life-giving and responsible. But when people fall short of that they should not be cast out and made pariahs. How did Jesus treat those who were named sinners by others? And what kind of sins did Jesus seem most concerned about?

- Even if public reports don't do so, we need to be careful not to lump all sexual



behavior as a failing in celibacy. For example, rape seems more an act of violence than of sex. And in its own way so does the sexual abuse of children. It's important to consider each instance in itself, and it's important, if we care to make judgments at all, to do so only after we know the full circumstances of the case.

- I think that we need to acknowledge that there is in the church today a good deal of discussion, indeed fermentation, about the issue of celibacy as a requirement for ordination to the priesthood. Until that issue is addressed in a thorough and peaceful way by the whole church, I think that the church will suffer losses on two flanks: one, we will fail to appreciate fully the rich and beautiful gift celibacy in itself is for the church, and two, we will suffer from our inability to draw to priesthood powerfully qualified candidates who would come to us if they were allowed to be married priests.

Thanks for attending to all of this. You'd do me a great favor if, having read this, you say an encouraging word to your parish priest. You can be very sure that he has a good heart and that encouragement will make him strong.

Peace to all.

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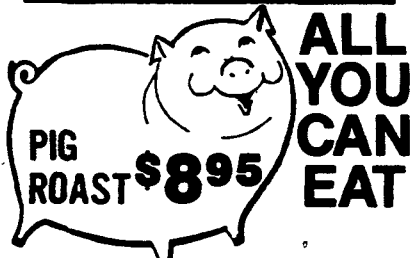
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Correction

In last week's front page story, "Seamless garment poses vote question," Ken Maher of the Catholic Family Center was misidentified as director of the agency's justice and peace department. Maher is the CFC's parish outreach program coordinator. The *Catholic Courier* regrets the error.

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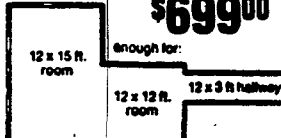
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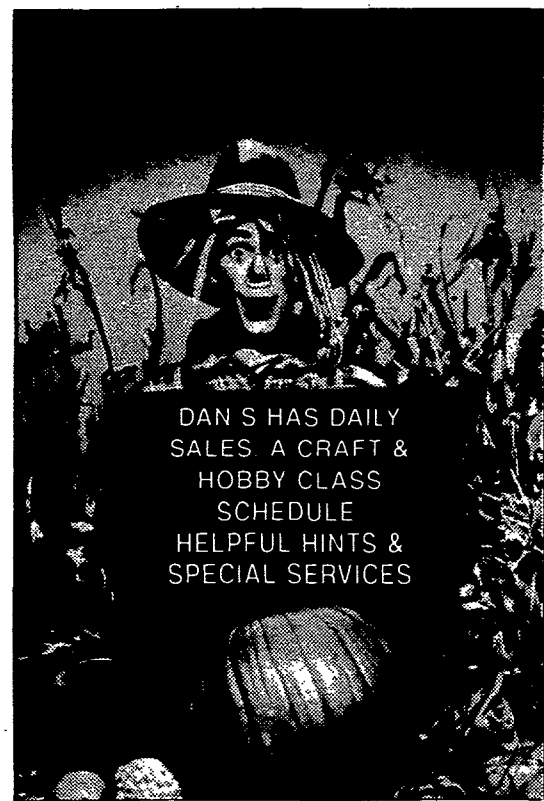
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