

# COLUMNISTS

## Belief that priests must be pure led to celibacy rule

More interesting than the history of clerical celibacy are the reasons that have been offered to justify it.

Jesus indicated that those who freely renounced marriage did so "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12), but without indicating how or why this is so. Paul also commended celibacy over marriage, but only because he believed that the end of the world and the second coming of Christ were imminent (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). It is important to note that neither Jesus nor Paul presumed to impose celibacy on anyone else.

The earliest demands for clerical celibacy arose in the fourth century, but they were based on the Old Testament, not the New. The appeal was to the prescriptions in the Book of Leviticus, requiring abstinence from sexual relations for at least a day before the performance of ritual service.

The belief was that priests were to maintain a higher standard of purity because of their role as offerers of sacrifice. But a celibate priesthood was never in question. On the contrary, marriage was regarded at the time as normal for all Jews, priests included.

When the council of Elvira in Spain (around the year 306) mandated that



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

even married priests were not to engage in sexual relations, it did so on the deplorable assumption that sexual activity was somehow dishonorable. However, since the overwhelming majority of lay people were married and had normal conjugal relations, that council in effect reduced them to second-class citizenship in the church.

By the second half of the fourth century, an increasing number of local synods and papal decrees were promoting clerical celibacy. The reason was always the same: because sexual intercourse was unholy, impure and even sinful, it compromises the priest's capacity to celebrate the liturgy worthily.

This emphasis on ritual purity, coupled with a growing desire for the daily celebration of the Eucharist, undoubt-

edly intensified the support for obligatory celibacy.

In the 10th and 11th centuries, the priesthood in the West had reached a nadir of corruption. Clerical marriage and concubinage were prevalent, and church lands and properties were being lost through inheritance to children of clergy.

By way of reaction, priests in monastic vows were appointed to important ecclesiastical positions, and the priest-monk became, in effect, the ideal for secular priests to emulate. It was no surprise, therefore, when Pope Gregory VII (1073-85) prohibited clerical marriages and dissolved those that already existed.

When the First and Second Lateran Councils (1123, 1139) mandated celibacy for all Latin-rite priests, their actions rested once again on the belief that sexual relations, even within marriage, were morally shameful. The Council of Trent (1545-63) would later teach that celibacy and virginity are spiritually superior to the married state.

Significantly, references to ritual impurity and the corresponding denigration of marriage were completely absent from the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)—a council that, in fact, insisted on the dignity and sacra-

mental status of marriage.

The council did characterize celibacy as a "precious gift of divine grace" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 42) that permits priests to serve the church with an "undivided heart" (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, n. 16).

At the same time, however, the council allowed for married deacons in the Latin rite and also offered special praise for the married priesthood of the Eastern Catholic churches.

Subsequently, Paul VI (1967) and the revised Code of Canon Law (1983) appealed to the New Testament rather than the ritual purity laws of the Old in support of celibacy.

Given Vatican II's recognition that celibacy is "not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, as is evident from the practice of the primitive Church and from the tradition of the Eastern Churches" (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, n. 16), one might legitimately speculate that pastoral necessity will bring the Roman Catholic Church in line once again with its earlier tradition and with the long-standing practice of the East.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## To be forgiven by Christ, we must first forgive others

24th Sunday of the Year (September 15): (R3) Matthew 18:21-35; (R1) Sirach 27:30-28:9; (R2) Romans 14:7-9.

According to people who have been there, the country of Albania is one of the most backward countries in the world. It is on the fringe of Europe, but it has none of the advantages enjoyed by Western nations. One of the reasons may be Albania's culture of revenge. It is unlike anything seen elsewhere in the modern world.

It is common in Albania to have blood feuds which date back many generations. In each family, the men bear a solemn obligation to avenge any harm done not only to their families, but also to their ancestors' families. This obligation is passed down to each son as soon as he reaches an age of responsibility.

At the heart of Christianity is forgiveness. Christ taught us that before we can be forgiven, we must forgive others.

How wonderful was the Marshall Plan, whereby Western nations helped our former enemies to rebuild their economies after the end of the Second World War. Imagine how different our world would be today if the Allies hadn't forgiven the peoples of Germany, Japan and Italy!



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

One of the great reasons why the world needs Jesus today is that people need to know how to forgive their neighbor. One can find the ability to forgive only at the feet of Christ.

There is a trick soap. It looks like a real bar of soap, but when you wash with it, you get dirty instead of clean. In an old television show, Allen Funt planted a fake bar of soap in a washroom and recorded the reactions of those who washed their hands with it. He reported that it was funny to watch them scrub and never get clean. But this is what happens when you turn anywhere else for help in dealing with your hurt and anger except to Christ. Rather than feeling better, you feel worse. Rather than getting clean, you feel dirtier. We all need God's

help, especially when it comes to seeking the power to forgive others.

Corrie ten Boom often thought back over the horrors of the Ravensbruck concentration camp. How could she ever forgive the former Nazis who had been her jailers? In their horror camp more than 95,000 women died.

Then in 1947 Corrie was speaking in a church in Munich. When the meeting was over she saw one of the most cruel male guards of Ravensbruck coming forward to speak to her. He had his hand outstretched. "I have become a Christian," he explained. "I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?" A conflict raged in Corrie's heart. The Spirit of God urged her to forgive. The spirit of bitterness and coldness urged her to turn away. "Jesus, help me," she prayed. Then she knew what she must do. "I can lift my hand," she thought to herself. "I can do that much."

As their hands met it was as if warmth and healing broke forth with tears and joy. "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart," she said.

Peter thought that he was big hearted: "How often should I forgive someone

who sins against me," he asked. "As many as seven times?" Peter thought that he was being generous. In the eyes of Jesus that was not enough. Jesus knew who cannot forgive cannot be forgiven.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

### Daily Readings

- Monday, September 16**  
1 Corinthians 11:17-26, 33; Psalms 40:7-10, 17; Luke 7:1-10
- Tuesday, September 17**  
1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27-31A; Psalms 100:1-5; Luke 7:11-17
- Wednesday, September 18**  
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Psalms 33:2-5, 12, 22; Luke 7:31-35
- Thursday, September 19**  
1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Psalms 118:1-2, 16-17, 28; Luke 7:36-50
- Friday, September 20**  
1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Psalms 49:6-10, 17-20; Luke 8:1-3
- Saturday, September 21**  
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13; Psalms 19:2-5; Matthew 9:9-13

# VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

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