

The Encyclical on Celibacy:  
Awaiting Its Publication  
Bishop Alfred Ancel

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Most Rev. Alfred Ancel, auxiliary bishop of Lyons, France, wrote the following reflections on the law of celibacy last April while awaiting Pope Paul's decision. The article appeared in *La Croix*, Paris Catholic daily. The encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* was dated June 24 and was printed in full in the October *Catholic Mind*.

BIBLIOTECA  
EL MONASTERO DE MEJERIN

■ It is a fact that priestly celibacy is at present questioned not only outside the Church, but even within it. Some envisage the possibility of a married clergy in the West, such as there is in the East.

Unfortunately, the discussion of priestly celibacy is sometimes impassioned and we all know that an impassioned discussion cannot lead to enlightenment.

Moreover, we are awaiting a decision of the Sovereign Pontiff on this subject and we cannot leave it out of account. The Pope did not want the subject discussed at the Council, but reserved to himself the study of its various aspects. The Council was therefore content to recall the legislation of the Latin Church and to ap-

prove it anew. This legislation, said the Council, "is not demanded by the nature of the priesthood" and "celibacy accords with the priesthood on many scores"; that is why "celibacy, at first recommended to priests, was afterward imposed by law, in the Latin Church, on all who were to be promoted to sacred orders" (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (§ 16)). Moreover, it is certain that the immense majority of the Fathers of the Council explicitly desired the continuance of the law. In spite of all, the intervention of the Pope permitted that the law be discussed after the Council, and so it has been.

We must therefore be ready to receive the decision of the Pope whatever it may be. That is why I would like to offer some reflections to remove the passion from the debate, insofar as that is possible. I express only my own opinion.

■ The marriage of priests is more spoken about than the possibility of a married clergy; well, the only hypothesis which is actually being studied is the possibility of a married clergy as it exists in the Eastern Church. In other words, alongside the celibate clergy there would be married men to whom the Church would give the priesthood.

No one at the Council envisaged that a priest would be given permission to marry and thus continue his priestly ministry. To dispel any ambiguity, let us say frankly that we must not expect any change in that respect. Priests will certainly not be

allowed to marry while continuing their ministry.

What is true is that in recent years the Holy See has given certain priests permission to marry sacramentally when, in fact, they did not have the aptitudes necessary for celibacy. But, in those cases, the priests had to promise to renounce definitely the exercise of their priestly functions.

It is therefore certain that the Pope will not permit the marriage of priests. It seems to me useful to say it categorically, because for certain priests "a confused and unformulated hope that perhaps they will be able one day to marry while remaining priests does not contribute to helping those concerned; it can only prolong the vague uneasiness and intensify a rejection of celibacy . . ." (Oraison, *Celibacy*, [Editions du Centurion,] 1966, p. 172).

It is sometimes said that celibacy is impossible, or, at least, that it impedes a true human flowering.

On this point, I shall content myself with a few quotations from the work of Marc Oraison that I have just cited. Clinical investigation and observation, he says, directly contradict "the gross and ineradicable prejudice according to which man's sexual activity would be provoked by a sort of inevitable psychological rhythm that is constraining in the manner of certain excretions" (p. 34). That does not mean that celibacy will not have any difficulty, but, according to clinical experience, "one observes couples who 'run badly,' that is to say, who are pathological, as

well as celibates who 'run well' and who are normal. Just as one also observes 'abnormal' celibates and 'normal' couples" (p. 28).

It is necessary, therefore, to go further. Always from a medical point of view, Oraison insists—at the same time—on the minimum of emotional maturity necessary to commit one's self to celibacy, and on the importance of the motives that determine the decision. If these two conditions are realized, celibacy is possible and can lead a person to a true human flowering.

Moreover, the absolute criticism of celibacy would go much too far; it would oppose even the existence of a celibate clergy alongside a married clergy.

Much more, it would oppose formally the teaching of Christ and of St. Paul, who, without ever imposing celibacy, proposed it as an ideal to be realized for the kingdom of heaven. Now, it is impossible that Jesus should have proposed as an ideal something impossible or contrary to human flowering.

■ But what creates a much more serious problem and a dangerous confusion is the manner of understanding the law of celibacy: "It is very important to take into account that it is not the celibacy of the priest that is discussed; it is solely the manner in which the ecclesiastical law, dating roughly from the 11th century, comprehends and presents it" (p. 174). Taking always a purely human point of view, Oraison wishes, "from the

point of view of psychology and mental health, that the juridical and exterior aspect of ecclesiastical celibacy will not be injurious to what we have called the mystical motivation" (p. 182).

Let us try, then, to see clearly. Exteriorly, the celibacy of priests appears as imposed by a law. That is why the commitment to celibacy truly has a juridical aspect. We must recognize that fact.

But, in other respects, it is unthinkable that celibacy, as such, be imposed by a law. Either the commitment to celibacy is free, or it is worthless. The ceremony of the ordination of subdeacons manifests it very visibly.

Nevertheless, this liberty can have two meanings. One can freely, and with the greatest awareness, want the priesthood and only resign one's self to celibacy as a necessary condition for being a priest. Or one can want, with the same liberty and eagerness, celibacy and the priesthood.

I must admit that, for a long time, I believed that only a commitment of the second type existed. But, alas! I have met priests who received priestly ordination without ever having directly willed celibacy; they had accepted it with resignation and they endured it. Evidently, these priests were living in continual difficulties and in crises that they never managed to outrun, even if, for conscience's sake, they remained faithful to what they had accepted through constraint.

It is necessary, therefore, in order to avoid any equivocation that, in

such a matter, would be very grave, to state very precisely the meaning of the commitment to the way of celibacy.

Let us recall first of all that no one, whatever may be the intensity of his desire to be a priest and whatever may be the objective value of the motives that urge him to the priesthood, has the right to demand priestly ordination from the Church. The Church is free to receive whom it wants and to fix the conditions of admission to the priesthood. Nevertheless, this liberty of the Church is not at all arbitrary; it is subordinated to the exercise of its mission; the Pope and the bishops are always bound to fulfill the mission that is theirs for the service of all the People of God and of the whole world.

If, therefore, the hierarchical authority, after having maturely reflected, thinks that it is more valuable for the fulfillment of the Church's mission that there be only celibate priests, it can decide thus, not in imposing celibacy on men who do not truly will it, but in choosing to be priests only men who, freely and in complete lucidity, directly will celibacy.

It will perhaps be said: "But in that case, there will not be enough priests." That's another question. We will speak of it later; what we're looking for now is the exact meaning of the law of celibacy.

Now, the law of celibacy does not mean that celibacy will be imposed on men who do not will it, who would only resign themselves to it

and would accept it only through constraint in order to be able to be priests. It means only those men will be accepted for the priesthood who desire, at the same time and in a completely free manner, to commit themselves to celibacy and to keep it voluntarily.

"But," one will be able to object, "what if someone has been mistaken about the real aptitudes for maintaining celibacy or even about his own real liberty?" That is still another question, which should be treated in its own right. If a person has been mistaken, that can be a reason for dispensing from the law of celibacy; but that dispensation will comprise renouncing the exercise of the priestly functions. This dispensation will therefore not be a lessening of the force of the law; it will on the contrary consecrate the value of it.

But then what is to be done with those who would like to be priests, but who do not have the aptitudes for celibacy or who refuse to commit themselves directly to it? If the law of priestly celibacy is maintained, it would be necessary to orient them toward the lay apostolate or, if they desire it, toward the married diaconate. It is, indeed, up to the Church to judge if its mission does or does not require having a married clergy alongside a celibate clergy. One would, therefore, be mistaken if he believed that the Church would change its custom solely to give satisfaction to some young men who would like to be priests on the condition of being able to found a fam-

ily. A person is not a priest for his own sake or to satisfy subjective aspirations; he is a priest for the sake of others, according to the requirements of the Church's mission.

■ We find ourselves confronted with a new confusion that must be dispelled. Certain people assert that the Church has imposed celibacy on the priest by transferring to the priesthood laws that were made for religious. It is therefore necessary, they think, to liberate priests completely from every constraint that they experience on this account. If there are priests who want to be religious, that's good; they will observe celibacy because they are religious and not because they are priests; but if there are priests who want to be priests without being religious, let them remain completely free to marry if they so desire. And if they are already married, why should they be prevented from receiving orders?

To answer this objection, I will recall the difference that exists between the specifically religious motivation and the specifically priestly motivation for celibacy; but I would like to present first two considerations: 1) These two forms of celibacy must not be opposed: both have their foundation in the gospel and in the love of Christ; on the other hand, the two motivations can most certainly exist in the same person and can mutually reinforce each other. 2) The priestly motivations that we are going to present must not be confused with a strict requirement deriving from the

very nature of the priesthood. We know that this requirement does not exist. But that does not eliminate the possibility of finding in the priesthood itself motives that urge us to commit ourselves freely to celibacy.

In taking into account these two comments, one can thus express the difference of motivations: there are men who will prefer chastity as a means of perfection and as an expression of that perfection: to be Christ's undividedly and to express in one's life that undivided love. This motivation is excellent; it is directly in the line marked out by St. Paul in the seventh chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians.

There are also men who desire perfect chastity in relation to the priestly mission itself. They would express themselves thus: "I want to be Christ's undividedly and to put at His disposition my whole being and all my activities in order to work with Him for the salvation of men." This perfect chastity can be called priestly, because it is linked to the apostolic dimension of the priesthood. It too is based on love: it is not willed solely in order that one may have more time to act; it is willed in order that one may belong entirely to Christ accomplishing His mission through us.

It was perhaps more difficult to understand the priestly character of this motivation when one saw in the priesthood only the power to carry out liturgical functions; but the Council has emphasized all the dimensions of the priesthood including the mis-

sionary dimension. We can, therefore, better understand today what a priestly motivation for perfect chastity is.

I have known priests and seminarians who have been delivered from their anxieties when they perceived how perfect chastity was situated within the gift they were making of themselves to Christ in order to be priests, in sharing His mission. One of them said to me: "Well, then, that is worth the renunciation of a family; it's so great to give one's self totally to Christ in that way in order to work with Him." That is truly chastity willed for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, in the strongest sense of the word. Isn't this priestly chastity in the line of descent from the Apostles who left all in order to follow Christ; in order to be with Him and to become with Him fishers of men?

There is another factor we must not forget. Priests of today experience more difficulties than in the past in order to remain faithful to their commitment to celibacy. That poses a problem we cannot evade.

■ Whatever the decision of the Pope may be, all of us who are already priests must remain faithful to our commitment. Consequently, it is good to seek together the conditions that will permit priests to have a truly full life in fidelity to their celibacy. Moreover, such priests exist and are very numerous. One of them said to his bishop: "They talk about priestly unrest; as for me, I'm happy to be a priest." But it does not suffice to

think about those who are already happy. It is also necessary to think about the others. It must come about that all priests are happy to be priests. The Church and the whole world need to encounter such priests. The priests's joy is a witness to Christ.

In the first place, the priest must believe in the necessity of his priesthood and that from all points of view. When a priest says to himself: "What's the use of being a priest?", he is already in danger. The priest of today is no longer, in most cases, a V.I.P.; the clergy no longer constitute a privileged and specially honored social class; religious practice and the faith itself, considered in the mass, are diminishing; man believes more and more that by science and technology he is going to construct the world and solve his problems.

In this situation, how would a priest be able to react who felt himself a stranger to the world and who may not have understood that his mission is necessary to save the world?

We must realize, therefore, we bishops and priests, the absolute necessity of our mission, which is the very mission of Christ, not only to assure the eternal salvation of men, but also to assure the earthly salvation of humanity. A man indeed accepts giving his life and sacrificing himself, but he wants to know what good that does. Thanks to the teaching of the Council, especially in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, we will find all the light we need.

On the other hand, whatever his job may be, the priest must feel that his priesthood is universal; with his brothers of the diocesan clergy and united to the bishop in a single presbyterium, he participates in the episcopal collegiality, and he feels upon himself the weight of the responsibility for the whole world. In this light his ministry, humble as it may be, appears to him in all its worth. He also feels himself more available for any mission of the Church, wherever it may be, according to the needs of men at the present time. On this point, the decrees on priests and on the missionary activity of the Church bring all the light desirable.

Such a realization of the true grandeur, of the necessity and responsibility of the priesthood, does not risk diminishing the role of the laity in the Church. Quite the contrary, the more the priest awakens to the consciousness of his priesthood, the more he will put himself at the service of the People of God. Moreover, it is very clear that the laity want priests who are truly priests, and who will help them to accomplish fully their lay role. Lay people know well that there has never been a good laity without a priesthood aware of its responsibility.

Perhaps these reflections seem foreign to the problem of priestly chastity? On the contrary, they condition the fidelity of the priest to his celibacy, since it's not in withdrawing within himself over his emotional problems, however real and painful they may be, that a priest finds his liberty and his joy, but rather in giv-

ing himself totally, with Christ, to his mission to save men.

■ A priest, nowadays, who contents himself with a merely individual ministry and worship, condemns himself to sadness and ineffectiveness. He must open his eyes to all the dimensions of the priestly apostolate, from a catechesis adapted to different classes of persons to the spiritual support of lay people engaged in their temporal activity and completely given at the same time to their apostolate. Then, the liturgy will be manifested to him with all its dimensions, in constant relation with human life and entirely oriented toward God in His glory. The Eucharistic sacrifice will truly be for him the point of departure and the summit of his priestly activity, and of all the activity of the People of God. The priest will then better understand the meaning of life and the significance of earthly realities.

In a world more and more socialized and diversified, the priest feels he can no longer continue a parochial apostolate as in the past. It is necessary that the apostolate be organized in a community manner, that it be diversified in order to cope with all the needs of men, and that it be unified at all levels from the basic apostolic sector up to the national or even international scale.

Finally, in this organization, no priest must feel that he is merely one who carries out orders; but he must experience his responsibility with the others, in union with the bishop, in

close collaboration with the religious and the laity. It is the whole People of God who are on a mission to save the world.

■ Such an apostolate should not require of the priest a life that is overworked and overwhelmed. We must indeed recognize that there are priests who are overworked and overwhelmed by their activities, but that is a sign that their apostolate has not been sufficiently thought out and organized. Overwork and submersion in work are evils that must be eliminated.

Relating, in particular, to perfect chastity, we must say that a priest who does not get enough sleep, who has too strained a rhythm of life, who is overwhelmed by occupations too numerous and too diverse, finds himself in danger, from the standpoint of his human and spiritual balance. Certainly, God does not ask such a life of us.

On the other hand, an underemployed priest—for there are some, not only in the countryside, but also in town—does not have a human and balanced rhythm of life, either. That is another problem, at least as important as the first.

Whatever may be the advantages that result from a balanced, well organized and well thought out apostolic life, we must say that such an apostolic life does not yet suffice to assure the priest of the emotional balance he needs. We have, no doubt, renounced founding a family, but we could not have renounced all emo-

tional support. Either we will have true community support, or we will risk looking for abnormal emotional compensations, unless we withdraw within ourselves, which would be the worst of all. It is not without reason that the Lord sent his disciples in pairs; we never see St. Paul alone. We need friendship.

No doubt, community exercise of the apostolate should bring about this friendship; but, in fact, people only act together while they are uniting themselves to the action, while it is union on the personal level that is necessary. Many have already felt this, and take the time necessary in order that true friendship may be born and may develop among the members of the apostolic team.

Others prefer to distinguish between gatherings centered on the apostolate and those that are more oriented toward spiritual support in fraternal exchanges. It doesn't matter how this friendship is realized concretely, provided that it is authentic and that it is established at all levels of the priest's life, human, apostolic and spiritual. Without intending to generalize, one must recognize that certain priestly crises have had their origin in a lack of friendship. As priests, we must feel that our brothers are entrusted to us. Listening to a confrere is not a waste of time. Tomorrow, perhaps, we will need him. Moreover, friendship between priests has a value of witness to which the laity are particularly attentive.

So that this friendship may be realized, it is not necessary to live in

common, but it is necessary to establish common meetings. In each case, a suitable rhythm must be discovered. One cannot compare the situation of a priest living in Christendom and sustained by the faith and respectful affection of his faithful with the situation of the priest of today who often feels isolated and misunderstood in the midst of a populace that needs him, certainly, but which is not aware of it. That is why, without intending to judge in any way those of bygone days, one can assert that community support will become more and more necessary for priests, not only from the standpoint of apostolic effectiveness but also from the human and spiritual standpoint.

■ Certainly, it is unthinkable that the rules separating priests from women, such as were generally presented in the past, be maintained today. The problem of the emotional education of priests is particularly pressing today. Thanks to a co-operation, already of long standing, among priests, doctors and psychologists, some precise directions have been given for this education. Its goal is to assure, as far as possible, the emotional maturity that permits a truly positive celibacy. Nevertheless, it should not be believed that one can attain this result by purely human means and that one may, under the pretext of emotional maturity, do without all asceticism. But this asceticism itself will be desired insofar as there is a true liberty that is essentially a spiritual liberty. In our relations with wom-

en, we priests should be able to realize the attitude of John the Baptist, the friend of the bridegroom, or even the attitude of Christ, in His relations with the Samaritan woman and the woman taken in adultery, on the one hand, or with Martha and Mary, on the other. He is always the Saviour, the one through whom the Father is seen. May we always be able to have a saviour's attitude and be the ones through whom Christ is seen.

How good it would be if we had at our disposition psychological orientations that were as precise as possible, while at the same time being supple and varied in order to take into account a diversity of temperaments and situations, and that would permit us, thanks to a positive asceticism, to acquire the spiritual liberty of apostles of Christ. Much has already been done in this direction, but there is much yet to be done. Let us recall, finally, that there will never be any authentic spiritual liberty without the death of all selfishness. One cannot attain the Resurrection without going through Calvary.

■ I have stressed, almost solely thus far, the apostolic or human conditioning of fidelity to priestly celibacy. It is on this point that we must seek the means that will allow all priests to flourish in their celibacy.

But the specific means, which, in themselves, are the most important of all, should not be forgotten. Normally, in order to be faithful, we must have a sufficient intensity of spiritual life. What most assures a fidelity to celi-

bacy is the strength of the motivation from which it proceeds. If this motivation loses its dynamism, or if it remains only at the level of an intellectual conviction, it cannot compensate for the frustration that results normally from celibacy.

I have stressed especially the specifically priestly motivation of celibacy, but there are other complementary motivations that we find in § 16 of the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests. We must impress ourselves with them and assimilate them in order that they may fill us with spiritual energy. Marc Oraison, in his book on celibacy, stresses above all the motivation, at once religious and priestly, of a celibacy lived as “a tangible manifestation of the kingdom of God” and he offers, at this juncture, a very profound reflection on the virginity of Mary (p. 131-133). Let each of us, in docility to the Holy Spirit, choose it, or the spiritual motivations best suited to him, and let him nourish himself profoundly with them. It is in the study of the word of God, in prayer, in a sacramental life profoundly animated by faith, that we shall find our light and strength.

■ In closing, I would like to say a few words on the strongest objection that has been made against the law of celibacy. Will there be enough priests in the Church of God and for the evangelization of the non-Christians if the Pope maintains the law of celibacy and if he does not admit a married clergy alongside a celibate clergy?

It is not up to me to make a decision. However, I have never hidden my personal preference. As a matter of fact, I think that the possibility of a married clergy would risk diminishing in us the effort of renewal that is imposed on the Church concerning the priestly life. The possibility of a married clergy would also risk diminishing the effort—just beginning to be realized—for a more just distribution of priests throughout the world.

The decrease in priestly vocations is, certainly, unfortunate, but it constitutes, in the first place, an appeal to bishops and priests. Have we concerned ourselves sufficiently with adult vocations? Have we used enough imagination and boldness so that the priest of today might be truly present to the world, aware of the necessity of his mission, and adapted to the conditions of actual life? When I speak of imagination or boldness, I do not at all intend to advocate either a new doctrine of the priesthood, or a confusion between the role of the priest and that of the layman. Quite the contrary, what I think is that we have not yet sufficiently assimilated the teaching of the gospel and of the apostolic writings on the priesthood and the apostolic mission; we have not sufficiently broken with certain traditions that far from coming from the gospel, are born, on the contrary, of a certain conformity with “the spirit of the world.” We have not yet had the courage to see where we are strangers in today’s world and little suited to it. I am persuaded that today’s young-

sters are capable of generosity and of a total gift of self to Christ in order to save their brothers. Yet it is necessary that they see concretely a visage of the priesthood that gives them a desire to be priests. Personally, I fear that if there were a married clergy alongside a celibate clergy, one might become quietly satisfied because, priests being more numerous, there would no longer be any problem.

The same thing is so in what concerns the distribution of priests in the world. It would be so much easier to say to the bishops of Latin America or Africa: "You lack priests, it's true. But don't worry. All you have to do is ordain married men!" It is easier to speak thus than to leave one's country in order to put one's self at the service of the bishops and priests of Africa or of Latin America. But what will then become of the missionary impetus of the Church, the sense of collegiality and the awareness of the universal dimension of the priesthood?

We have more than once spoken of the Pope and of the decision he must make. Do we think enough about praying for him? Most certainly, he is informed. He has had to listen to one side and to the other; but finally, it's up to him to decide. This decision is of the very first importance for the Church and for the world.

Whatever he decides, he must be sure of our confident docility.

Let us also think about our brothers in the priesthood who are restless and tormented. Surely it is necessary to remove ambiguities and to face the problem. There are those, we know, who hope, more or less unconsciously, for a profound change in the discipline of the Church, even going so far as to permit priests to marry. We know that, in that, they are mistaken; but they suffer and they are our brothers. Let us not content ourselves with praying for them; they must feel still more loved by their brothers. We must also, even in the present structures of the apostolate, do, from now on, our utmost so that, united among ourselves and with our bishops, we may manifest a flourishing and happier priestly life.

Finally, I think of you lay people who have read these words. The celibacy of priests is a good of the Church. Be with us, your bishops and your priests, true, faithful men and women, who believe in the priesthood of Christ, whatever our deficiencies may be. Help us by your prayer, by your confidence and also by your needs. Remember, unceasingly, that you need beside you true priests, that is, men who represent Christ, as His envoys, in order to work with you for the salvation of the world.

The Encyclical on  
Celibacy: A Commentary  
by Msgr. Victor M. Nazario

262.14

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The following article was published in the August issue of *Vispera*, the new quarterly of the Latin American secretariat of Pax Romana, Montevideo, Uruguay. Msgr. Nazario is a staff member of the Intercultural Documentation Center (CIDOC) at Cuernavaca, Mexico. This is the first publication of the article in English.

■ The discussion of priestly celibacy has become so widespread that the Pope thought it wise to express himself on the issue. For those who saw a threat to the Church in the mere discussion of the subject; his confirmation of the present status of celibacy is good news. It is sad news for those who were hoping for new avenues to deal with the problem of evangelization in the modern world.

If we read the Pope's letter carefully, trying to follow his reasoning process and not merely looking for his position on celibacy, we will probably conclude that the encyclical forecasts the end of celibacy. For the Pope seems to advance no arguments that have not already been refuted. Hence we are led to wonder if his pronouncements will not suffer the

same fate as Pope John's encyclical on Latin.

But a more thoughtful and dispassionate reading of the encyclical reveals that the Pope is well aware of the problems and foresees possible solutions that have not yet become clear. The fact that he asks for a careful study of the problem in two different sections of the letter shows that he is open to new and more plausible solutions and that he wants the issue to be clarified in keeping with the demands of faith and human dignity.

In the first part of the encyclical, after a summary of the problem about priestly celibacy, he goes on to ask: "How can it [celibacy] be changed from a burden to a help for the priestly life?" (§ 3) The question itself implies that there is nothing wrong with celibacy as such, but that the problem lies in the burdensomeness of this imposed practice. A burden freely accepted is still a burden.

It is the desire to follow an apostolic vocation, the desire for priesthood as such, that normally lead a man to ask for ordination. These motives are, of their nature, deeper and more compelling than any desire for celibacy. In fact, the acceptance of celibacy is not made easier by the fact that the usual context in which it is vowed is formal, legalistic, moralizing and preceptive. One need not be a psychologist to see that a decision to be celibate made in such a context is not likely to flow from a profound religious conviction.

Conscious of all these difficulties, the Pope states a new mode of accept-

ance of the obligation of celibacy. He declares that celibacy will not be considered obligatory and permanent until it is ratified by the ordination to the priesthood (§ 71). He goes on to say that "the commitment to celibacy should be observed for certain stipulated periods of experimentation before it becomes permanent and definite through ordination to the priesthood." The reason for this change is to allow the candidate enough time and opportunity to mature humanly and spiritually. If we consider what human and spiritual maturing implies, we can see that the Pope is introducing new and important modifications into the present legislation.

Human maturing demands that these periods of experimentation between the ecclesiastical studies and the ordination take place in the only environment that allows for such a maturing process, the real world of today with all the risks and responsibilities that life, as well as faith, imply.

Spiritual maturing represents an even greater challenge. A mature faith is one purified by tensions and crises—we can think of those described by St. John of the Cross. This purified faith must have withstood all those tensions of life in the world which the priestly apostolate deals with. The Pope seems to be asking for a deferment of ordination until the age of 35 to 40. If we are honest, we must drop the superficial talk about the maturing that takes place in the seminaries.

The Holy Father confirms the

Western tradition of celibacy and wants that norm to be followed in the Church today. A change of discipline would certainly not imply that the Church was previously wrong or that the influence of the Holy Spirit was absent from the Church in the past. Such a change could be based on historical circumstances paralleling those of the Oriental Church, about which the Pope states: "If the legislation of the Eastern Church is different in the matter of discipline with regard to clerical celibacy . . . this is due to the different historical background of that most noble part of the Church, a situation that the Holy Spirit has providentially and supernaturally influenced" (§ 38). Nevertheless, we do not claim to judge the reasons for the Pope's decision. He has a right to decide. What we consider worth reflecting upon as leading toward a new direction in the Church is his deep theological reasoning concerning the *myth of numbers*. The Pope says: "Jesus has taught us also that the Kingdom of God has an intrinsic and unobservable dynamism that enables it to grow without our noticing it" (§ 47).

The Pope sees the life of the Church as rooted in mystery, and not summed up in the rationalization of numbers. This is a fundamental theological principle that should guide the minds of all who are interested in the upbuilding of the Kingdom. It is a challenge, both to those who defend a married clergy in order to supply the numbers needed for apostolic work, and to those who insist on re-

cruiting "vocations" by all human means in order to supply personnel for institutions that should have been abolished long ago.

A loyal acceptance of the Pope's directives would bring about, at least for the present moment, a substantial reduction in the number of priests. But it would also bring about a wave of renewal in the Church, because it would call forth a new organized action of Christian groups. Laymen would have to come out of their anonymity. New ways of Christian celebration should come forth and a new rhythm in the celebration of the Eucharist could develop. As a result, a new image of the priest and his relationship to the Christian community would emerge.

The encyclical invokes the admirable mystery of the priesthood of Christ, His life and example, as the goal toward which the sacramental testimony of the People of God should tend (§ 19-25). The Pope figuratively applies to the sacramental minister the marvelous reality of the Paschal mystery that takes place in Christ and is sacramentalized in the Church. It is, of course, <sup>un</sup>conceivable that any one ministry in the Church contain the whole of this Paschal mystery. Only the interaction of the gifts of the Spirit, freely distributed among its members, provides for the fullness of the witnessing power of the Church (Cf. 2 Cor. 12).

■ I accept with pleasure the invitation of the Holy Father to express my own personal experience as a priest

(§ 25). I have exercised my ministry for 22 years; I have a great appreciation for celibacy; and I do not contemplate renouncing it. But I understand the real depth of my ministry only in an inseparable relationship to the priesthood of the People of God. My priestly function is to live the Paschal mystery that is now present, and to celebrate it with the whole community. I do not feel that my priestly mission grants me status or privilege or power. I do feel the responsibility to see to it that the people exercise their priesthood with me.

I believe that the mysterious witnessing involved in the risk of faith represented by celibacy is necessary if the Christian community is to express to the world its nature as a Kingdom and to exercise the full extent of its sacramentality. Hence I see an intimate relationship between the charism of celibacy and the priestly character of the Christian community. Both of them form the complete image of the Church-Sacrament. I do not, however, consider it in any way essential or important that the testimony of celibacy be linked to any one ministry in particular.

Nevertheless, when a conjunction between celibacy and a specific ministry, e.g., the priesthood, flows from the deliberate will of the Christian community, it constitutes a trend within a style of communitary life that undoubtedly represents a positive value. On the contrary, when the conjunction between celibacy and priesthood is imposed by law on a community that does not want it or

cannot appreciate it, it leads, as a general rule, to an isolation and alienation between priest and community.

Priestly discipline on celibacy in the Eastern Church was, the Pope says, developed within special historical circumstances under the action of the Holy Spirit. This development was possible because of the freedom these churches enjoyed to plan their own historical development. This may also be true of some churches in the Western Rite where priestly celibacy became a norm. Many other churches, though, have never had the freedom to adjust their discipline according to historical circumstances and the inspirations of the Spirit. Many churches, particularly in the New World, never succeeded in rooting their Christian faith in their particular cultures or in matching their Christian testimony to the rhythm of their historical development. In many instances, the cause of their failure has been the priestly style of life imposed upon them. Not infrequently, priestly celibacy has been a major obstacle to the consolidation of the Christian communities.

■ We make no attempt to justify the lack of appreciation of the charism of celibacy by such communities. We know this implies a lack of depth of faith. We must, nevertheless, ask ourselves honestly if this lack is not the result of a faulty process of evangelization, which insisted on the simultaneous assimilation of all the mysteries of faith. We must earnestly consider that a valid method of evange-

lization demands a slower process of assimilation of doctrines and a more respectful attitude to the customs and sociological development of the local communities. Celibacy must be viewed from the standpoint of the communities to be served.

Chastity, says Pope Paul VI, is not a virtue that is acquired once and for all; it is the result of a laborious effort and a daily affirmation. He also points out the many reasons why the choice of celibacy under present discipline may be false or immature. He proposes healthy ways of dealing with this problem, including the use of psychological techniques and medical science for the selection and training of future priests. He also admits that celibacy may be confronted with difficult and even insurmountable crises for many reasons, including a sheer unwillingness to continue living up to the promise.

Under such circumstances, it must be a source of pleasure and joy for the Church to grant to those men the freedom that, under the hypothesis of a free choice, they have never lost, and allow them to freely continue to follow their own personal conviction. Even in the exceptional case of bad faith, which should never be presupposed, the Church must feel the responsibility to take away any possible stumbling block that might lead to new infidelities or, what is still worse, to contempt for the Church, with the usual concomitant shock of faith.

Fidelity to the charism of celibacy is not a matter of obligation, but a

measure of generosity. And generosity cannot be demanded or imposed or measured by any criteria apart from the intimate conviction of faith.

The encyclical seems to assign a proper place to the relationship between celibacy and apostolic availability (§ 32). From a theological standpoint this special type of "celibacy" is rather a circumstantial and transitory one.

We must not overlook the Pope's insistence on the biological and psychological aspects of celibacy. His vision must be extended to, and lead to a revision of, the principles upon which sexual training for youth is presently based. If the present moral system is not renewed and brought up to date, we will continue to lack the proper climate for the development of the charism of celibacy. A chastity that is grounded on ancient myths that contradict the findings of modern science cannot be a solid basis for either a celibate life or a soundly oriented married life.

The encyclical comes to us at a crucial moment of the Church's history. There is danger that we may let ourselves be so absorbed in ratifying the present discipline of celibacy that we overlook what I consider the core of the encyclical: the important doctrinal points it hints at which could bring about a serious reform in the Church. The encyclical is a challenge to bishops and to those in charge of the training of priests to do their part in searching for the answers to the problems posed by the Pope.