News
Opinion



Vestments are seen in this 2018 file photo (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Peter Daly

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

July 22, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Celibacy contributes to a culture of mendacity in the priesthood.

In the 2015 movie "Spotlight," the voice of Richard Sipe (played by Richard Jenkins) says over the speaker phone, “If you really want to understand the crisis, you need to start with the celibacy requirement.” He continues, “That was my first major finding. Only 50% of the [Catholic] clergy are celibate. Now, most of them are having sex with other adults. But the fact remains that this creates a culture of secrecy that tolerates and even protects pedophiles."

Sipe, the former priest and psychologist, who died in August 2018, devoted much of his life to the psychological treatment of priests. He wrote extensively on priestly celibacy. In 1990, he published *A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy*. He estimated then that at any given time only 50% of priests, monks and bishops are actually celibate. This contributes to a culture of mendacity (lying).

In a 2016 letter to San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy, Sipe wrote:

> *Sooner or later it will become broadly obvious that there is a systemic connection between the sexual activity by, among and between clerics in positions of authority and control, and the abuse of children. … When men in authority — cardinals, bishops, rectors, abbots, confessors, professors — are having or have had an unacknowledged-secret-active-sex life under the guise of celibacy, an atmosphere of tolerance of behaviors within the system is made operative.*

In other words, priests and bishops are not going to expose others because they may be guilty themselves. The recent cases of former cardinal Theodore McCarrick and Bishop Michael Bransfield of West Virginia prove this point. How could they rise so high and allegedly endure so long in their double lives? Perhaps because people who knew were also compromised by sexual activity.

Related: The priesthood is being crucified on the cross of celibacy

In our 2016 novel *Strange Gods: A Novel About Faith, Murder, Sin and Redemption*, which I wrote with Msgr. Jack Myslinski, the character of Msgr. Matthew Ackerman says:

> *The problem is being celibate. Celibacy turns us all into liars. ... The whole thing is built on mendacity. ...*
>
> *Celibacy leaves a wound. Some people kid themselves into thinking it doesn't, but it does. You try to compensate, but you are never really whole. Some priests drown their sorrows in alcohol or pills. A lot of them overeat and get obese. ... Some guys travel all the time to escape. Others take secret lovers. Some redecorate the rectory over and over again. That's a classic clerical tradition, decorating. Just look at all the frescoes in the Vatican. It's a kind of retail therapy that has been going on for centuries.*

Again, the cases of McCarrick and Bransfield illustrate this "celibacy wound" compensation. Both men decorated lavishly and traveled luxuriously. Both allegedly carried on secret sexual liaisons, evidently trying to heal their "celibacy" wound.

In 1994, I wrote an article about celibacy for The Washington Post following several priest sexual scandals in Washington. I said then:

> *In light of recent sexual scandals involving priests, I find some skepticism about priestly celibacy. Among skeptics, I get one of two reactions. Some people think priest are liars. Others think we are fools. Some of the time, of course, they are right.*

Don't think that this is just an American problem. It is a universal problem as scandals in Poland, Ireland, France, India, Philippines, Kenya, Congo, and Costa Rica, etc. have shown. In Africa, where some of the fiercest defenders of celibacy are to be found, it is widely reported that priests routinely live double lives, keeping "secret" families in homes far from their parishes.

On June 1, The Washington Post reported that Fr. Peter Njogu is publicly leading a breakaway Renewed Universal Catholic Church in Kenya over the issue of celibacy. He is married and has established himself as a bishop of a schismatic church. Twenty priests have followed him along with more than 2,000 Catholics in several congregations. He said in The Post, "They (his followers) are tired of the hypocrisy. Some of our people call us the 'Church of the Future.' " Njogu says that other priests tell him, "The problem with you is that you went public. And I say, 'I am not the

problem: I am the solution. Join me.' "

In Latin America I have encountered the same phenomenon. People openly express skepticism about celibacy because they know or suspect that Padre has a secret family. Look at Legionaries of Christ founder Marcial Maciel Degollado, who had not one but two secret families in Mexico.

Celibacy is not essential to holiness. Many saints were married and had children. The Second Vatican Council said there is a universal call to holiness. If celibacy were essential to holiness, then most of the church could not be holy. Sex is an essential part of holiness in the sacrament of matrimony. We say that marriages are "consummated" by a sexual relationship.

Celibacy is not essential to Catholic priesthood. It is only mandated in two of the 24 "autonomous churches" in communion with Rome; the Latin Rite and the Ethiopian Rite. All of the others — the Ukrainian Rite, Syrian Rite, Maronite Rite, Coptic Rite, etc. — allow their priests to marry prior to ordination. Are 22 churches of the East not also holy?

St. Peter was not celibate. Much of the clergy for the first 1,000 years of Christianity were not celibate.

Celibacy was not mandated for diocesan clergy until the first Lateran Council (1123) and reaffirmed by the second Lateran Council (1139). Both of those decrees were brought on by the fact that many clergy, especially in rural areas, had wives or concubines. Often they gave church property to their families. Celibacy then was honored more in the breach than the observance.

At least seven popes were married. Several others had children either before or during their papacies. Pope Julius II, the pope who commissioned Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel, fathered three daughters. There was even a father and son pope combination, Pope Hormisdas (514-523) who was father to Pope Silverius, (536-537) who himself fathered an illegitimate daughter.

Paul presumed that bishops would be married, but he said they should be self-controlled (Titus 1:8). Still good advice. Paul himself favored celibacy for practical reasons because it allowed the unmarried man to be single minded in his work for the church (1 Corinthians 7:32-33).

Today we have many married priests in the Roman Rite who have come to us from the Anglican or Lutheran traditions. The Washington Archdiocese, like many American dioceses, has several married priests who were first ordained in the Episcopal church and then received into the Roman church. If they can be married, why not others?

Advertisement

The practice and teaching of the church on priestly celibacy has been inconsistent and incoherent. But, most important of all, Jesus did not mandate celibacy.

The only time Jesus talked about celibacy was in the context of marriage and divorce. When the disciples pressed Jesus on his strict view regarding divorce, they said incredulously, "maybe it was better not to marry."

Jesus answered: "Some are incapable of marriage because they are born so; some, because they are made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it" (Matthew 19:12).

He sees celibacy as something praiseworthy, but not necessary.

One other thing. If conservatives really think that gay priests are the problem with the priesthood, they should favor abolishing mandated celibacy. One sure way to get more heterosexuals into the priesthood is allow married men to be ordained. If priests had a wife and family, odds are they would not be gay.

Mandatory celibacy for the diocesan clergy of the Roman rite should be abandoned immediately. It is a necessary first step in the reforming of Catholic priesthood.

It will make us more mature, more honest and more virtuous.

It will also give the church the shepherds she needs for the flock.

[Fr. Peter Daly is a retired priest of the Washington Archdiocese and a lawyer. After 31 years of parish service, he now works with Catholic Charities.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Fr. Peter Daly's column, Priestly Diary (formerly called Parish Diary), is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 1-14, 2019** print issue under the headline: Celibacy advances culture of compromised truths.