

Pope Benedict gets the celibacy question backward

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Nov. 4, 2010 | Bulletins from the Human Side

I remember the trouble my father and I once had putting the screens up on our house. The last two, like wailing and willful children, fought us and required so much forcing that we splintered an edge off one of them. Only then did we discover that we had roughly manipulated number 10 into number 11's window and vice versa.

As with Pope Benedict's recent remarks on celibacy, we had constructed a misshapen symbol of the hazards of getting things backward. The screens were out of sequence and they bulged ominously as if they might pop out of their frames; we had some laughs as fathers and sons can as we corrected our mistakes.

Pope Benedict, however, does not seem to appreciate that he has pressured his arguments out of logical order and that, like our misaligned screens, they may pop dangerously out of the Vatican windows that he is determined to seal off lest someone remember that Vatican II opened them to the world. Specifically, the pope, according to *The Wall Street Journal* (October 10, 2010), "defended the church's celibacy prerequisite as a way for priests to attain 'an authentic, pure and mature humanity.'" That is where the pope has things backward.

There is no evidence that celibacy gives seminarians an opportunity to achieve the ideal of "authentic, pure and mature humanity." There is evidence that celibacy can only be lived by candidates who are already authentic and mature when they enter the seminary.

In the psychological study commissioned by the American bishops after Vatican II, it was learned that the celibate life demanded but could not and did not produce maturity in priests who had not already achieved it. Celibacy was experienced as an onerous requirement that few, if any, priests would have chosen as a style of life on their own.

In fact, celibacy might well be investigated as a secular virtue for people like the secretary of state, rock stars, and the many men who, like the George Clooney character in "Up in The Air," are always traveling and are seldom at home. How many memoirs sadly begin with such phrases as "My father was so busy he didn't have much time for us."? If he wants to promote useful celibacy, Benedict should organize these legions of the lonely.

Most good priests observed celibacy by adjusting to it rather than finding it a pathway to transcendence. They kept the stressful rule because they were healthy in the first place and had the personal resources as well as the family and fraternal support that characterized the Catholic culture at that time. The classic clerical culture had some remarkably helpful features, especially the friendship and fellowship it promoted among healthy priests. The latter also enjoyed the support of the intact families from which most of them came and the respect and understanding of a Catholic culture then more tightly bound in its insularity from the general American culture.

That culture also idealized the youth who became a priest as it did the mother who remained, for most, the only woman with whom priests had an enduring relationship. Many priests lived out their celibacy by living without growing out of their earliest nurturing relationships and never achieving the human qualities that the pope claims that life without marriage will produce. Those who came to the vow of celibacy in an immature state did not find it a resource for completing their personal development.

Psycho-sexually under-developed priests were thereby made vulnerable to the unexpected and overwhelming circumstances that tripped off their sexual development again often pitching them into darkness bound struggles to understand their impulses and previously unsuspected human needs. One cannot airily claim that celibacy played no role in creating the sex abuse scandal that arose in this cadre of immature men who accepted it long before they were mature enough to understand marriage, sex, or themselves.

Touching also were the adjustments that healthy priests made to celibacy that many of them experienced as an enforced bachelorhood. In fact, these priests were often criticized for the expensive hobbies, cars, and vacations they took as a way of maintaining their sanity rather than as a celebration of the "pure and mature humanity" that the pope envisions as streaming from the Grail of celibacy.

Holy Father, you have forced the screens onto the wrong windows. In short, you are forcing an abstract ideal of celibacy onto the gritty reality of real-life celibacy and it doesn't fit. Indeed, the only requirement for the priesthood is the mature capacity to form healthy relationships with other human beings. That cuts across all the other screens, such as gender and homosexuality that continue to be hammered into the niches of church requirements for priesthood as if they were stained glass.

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