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Can the Catholic Church Afford to Do without Clerical Celibacy

Francis Edumalichukwu Okonkwo C.S.Sp.

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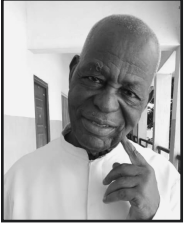


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Francis Edumalichukwu Okonkwo, C.S.Sp. Fr. Francis Edumalichukwu Okonkwo, C.S.Sp., of the Nigeria South-East Spiritan Province was ordained priest in 1965. After missionary work in Sierra Leone and a year's course in spirituality, he became novice master at Awo-omama, just after the Biafran Civil War. In 1976, he did an MA program in the Institute of Formative Spirituality, Duquesne University under Adrian van Kaam, C.S.Sp. Since return to Nigeria he has been in formation ministry and retreat preaching in parishes and among religious and clergy. He developed a program, Sexuality-Friendships-Celibacy, that he gives in novitiates and spiritual years, seminaries, tertian programs, and the *presbyteria* of some dioceses.

Celibacy is a state or lifestyle full of mystery

CAN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AFFORD TO DO WITHOUT CLERICAL CELIBACY?

INTRODUCTION

The suggestion at the Synod for Amazonia (October 2019) of ordaining married men (*viri probati*) already serving the pastoral needs of isolated communities raised a storm.¹ One of the most vocal opponents was Cardinal Robert Sarah. His book, written with the collaboration of pope emeritus, Benedict XVI, has just been published.² Cardinal Sarah writes,

Celibacy is for the priest the means of entering into an authentic vocation as spouse There is a true analogy between the sacrament of Matrimony and the sacrament of Holy Orders, both of which culminate in a total gift of self. This why the two sacraments are mutually exclusive The priest's capacity for spousal love is entirely given to and reserved for the Church. The logic of the priesthood excludes any 'other spouse' than the Church.³

Without necessarily understanding marriage and holy orders as essentially “mutually exclusive,” this article takes the position that despite its challenges, the Catholic Church cannot afford to do without clerical celibacy.

The Church of Christ, the founder himself, the Eucharist, and the ministerial priesthood are mysteries; they require faith for understanding. They all have intrinsic links with the one message of Christ, the arrival of the kingdom of God. Celibacy is a state or lifestyle full of mystery and necessarily linked to the ministerial priesthood that is a service to God's people. Today, the charism of celibacy challenges the church. But God's mysteries are above merely human reasoning and cultures. Being above does not mean being against; because God is the author of both the human reason and his mysteries, reason can open itself up to mystery through the gift of faith. Faith and obedience will appear strikingly in this reflection.

THE KINGDOM MAKES DEMANDS ON THE DISCIPLE

Jesus heralded the Good News with a war cry challenging the *status quo*: “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). Repentance is the watchword. John opened his gospel with the advent of the Word as a duel between light and darkness: “the light shines in darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it” (John 1:5—New Living Translation).⁴ We

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know that the witness of faith can never succumb to the darkness of any era or culture.

When Peter blurted out, “we have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?” (Matt 19:27), Jesus answered, in the version by Luke:

Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive [back] an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life in the age to come” (Luke 18:29-30).

Luke includes “wife” and “children” among what an itinerant disciple of Jesus leaves. Peter was married when called (see Mark 1:29-31) and with the rest of the apostles took along “a sister, a woman” (1 Cor 9:5) on his apostolic journeys.⁵ The phrasing, especially as Paul had himself chosen celibacy, must refer to a virgin who lives with an apostle, not as wife, but as a housekeeper.⁶ This suggests that the apostles gave up the use of marriage.

In this, they would be assimilating to Christ who preached the kingdom of God in celibacy. When his disciples objected to his teaching on marriage and divorce that, “If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (Matt 19:10), Jesus proclaimed, “some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some because they were made so by others; some because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:12). “For the sake of the kingdom” is missional, it calls for total self-donation in order to build it up. Jesus both defended his own choice of celibacy (“eunuch”) and “asked them to give up the family and conjugal life . . . an existence totally committed to the service of the kingdom.”⁷ So, Cardinal Stickler argues for the “apostolic origins of clerical celibacy and its observance from the very beginning,”⁸ in that Jesus in Luke 18:28-30 laid down “the commitment to continence in the use of marriage after ordination.”⁹

Paul too pursued a celibate lifestyle. To the Corinthians asking about the married life, he said, “Indeed, I wish everyone to be as I am, but each has a particular gift from God . . .” (1 Cor 7:7). He received the charism of celibacy for the exercise of ministry among the Gentiles.

The apostolic Heart of Mary was steeped in celibate love. The divine motherhood of the Blessed Virgin illustrates the powerful fruitfulness of celibate self-giving by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). Virgin and Mother, she is the spouse

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of the Holy Spirit, the mother of God who serves the divine plan of salvation. The celibate priest becomes spouse of the church, father of God's people, serving the same plan of salvation.

INTIMATIONS OF CELIBACY AMONG THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

A faction in Corinth already held that “it is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor 7:1). “Touching a woman” is euphemism for sexual intercourse, that is, this faction rejected all intercourse of man and woman.¹⁰ It appeared that for them “even those believers who are married should not have sexual relations with their spouses.”¹¹

Tertullian of North Africa (circa 153–230) clearly preferred celibacy to marriage, which for him was only a lesser evil—marry we may, because marry we must—to avoid the greater evil of burning in hell. In *An Exhortation to Chastity* addressed to his wife, Tertullian plotted three degrees of holiness of Christian life: remain a virgin from birth, live a life of virginity after baptism, and one and only one marriage—a second marriage after the death of one spouse he equated with polygamy.¹²

excluding remarriage after the death of the wife indicates that the church was straining for ways of evangelical radicalism for its clergy

1 Tim 3:2-3 decreed that “a bishop¹³ must be irreproachable, married only once . . . He must manage his own household well, keeping his children under control with perfect dignity.” These presbyter-bishops, forerunners of bishops and priests, clearly had children. However, excluding remarriage after the death of the wife indicates that the church was straining for ways of evangelical radicalism for its clergy. Eusebius of Caesarea (was present at Nicaea) interpreted 1 Tim 3:2 as meaning that those dedicated to the service of the divine cult must abstain from sexual relations with their wives.¹⁴

In fact, Cardinal Stickler argues that celibacy is not just “suitable” to the priesthood, rather “really necessary and indispensable to [it].”¹⁵ Long before it was first codified as written norm (*lex*) in early fourth century, celibacy was obligatory custom or legal practice (*ius*, law).¹⁶ The first written norm, an isolated move at the time, the Spanish Council of Elvira (300 CE), imposed the obligation of continence:

It has seemed good absolutely to forbid the bishops, the priests, and the deacons, i.e., all the clerics engaged in service at the altar, to have [sexual] relations with their wives and procreate children; should anyone do so, let him be excluded from the honor of the clergy (canon 33).¹⁷

The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) debated making celibacy compulsory for all clergy—bishops in both East and West were

already bound to continence in marriage. Sozomen (375–477)¹⁸ reports that Paphnutius, a confessor, argued that marriage being honorable and chaste, cohabitation with their wives was chastity. Restriction might lead to incontinence, besides, the ancient tradition of the church prescribed that those unmarried before ordination remain so and the married not to put away their wives. Some consider this intervention of Paphnutius unhistorical.¹⁹ This story about Paphnutius perhaps undergirds the Eastern tradition which in the Council of *Trullo* (691) legislated that bishops must practice perfect continence (if married, they must separate from their wives); others who have received orders may not marry, but ordained married men may enjoy the use of marriage.²⁰ Nevertheless, during their “time of service” in the sanctuary, they would, like Old Testament priest, give up the use of marriage.

Be that as it may, only one canon has come down from Nicaea on this:

The great Synod has stringently forbidden any bishop, presbyter, deacon, or any one of the clergy whatever, to have a subintroducta dwelling with him, except only a mother, or sister, or aunt, or such persons only as are beyond all suspicion (canon 3).

it pleases us all that bishop, priest, and deacon, guardians of purity, abstain from [conjugal intercourse] with their wives

Subintroducta means a woman furtively introduced. Does a wife not being mentioned among women permitted to live in a cleric’s house suggest that the fathers took obligation to continence for granted?²¹

Canon 2 of the Council of Carthage (390 CE) reported that “the bishops declared unanimously: it pleases us all that bishop, priest, and deacon, guardians of purity, abstain from [conjugal intercourse] with their wives, so that those who serve at the altar may keep a perfect chastity.”²²

Pope Innocent I (401–417) received questions among which was the chastity and purity of priests. His answer to the third question was clear:

*It has been decided with respect to bishops, priests, and deacons, who are obliged to participate in the divine services . . . that they are bound not only by us but by the divine Scriptures to chastity; to which effect the fathers have also enjoined corporal continence.*²³

Lateran Council II (1139) decreed Holy Orders an impediment to marriage

Eventually in the West, Lateran I (1123) made into general law the prohibition of cohabiting with wives (canon 7). Lateran Council II (1139) decreed Holy Orders an impediment to marriage, making any attempt at marriage by an ordained cleric

invalid.²⁴ The monk Gratian in 1142 initiated the beginning of canon law. His collection of all laws of the first millennium, called the Decretum of Gratian, accepted the Paphnutius story at the Council of Nicaea and canon 13 of the Council of Trullo (691), though not binding on the Latin Church, yet as explaining the diverse legislation in the East as regards celibacy.²⁵

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The foundations for a mystical theology of priesthood are found in the interconnectedness of Christ with the mystery of Holy Orders and the Eucharist. Christ is **the** priest of the New Covenant. He offers a new sacrifice in his own blood. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13). On the cross, our high priest made a total self-donation to the Father and for us. On the cross, he proved himself the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep, the celibate loving Bridegroom of his Church. "Ordination elevates the man ordained into a supernatural organic union with Christ."²⁶ Characterized by character he acts "in the person of Christ." "Character" translates the Greek word, *sphragis*, which denotes a seal, an impress, or imprint that "conforms his person to Christ and impresses his [Christ's] likeness on him."²⁷ These acts flow from who/ what he is, *agere sequitur esse*. He is thus Christ's ambassador and steward of his mysteries (2 Cor 5:20; 1 Cor 4:1). He too is called to total self-donation, to celibate love. The Church expects from the ordained priest a spousal love as the Head himself: "A pastoral love in his duty—24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year (even when he is not actively involved in ministerial tasks)."²⁸ St. John Paul II writes: "the Church, as the Spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her Head and Spouse love her. Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self *in* and *with* Christ to his Church . . ." (*Pastores dabo vobis*, no. 29).

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THE EUCHARIST AND THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

The celebration on Christ's Cross on Calvary was his total self-gift to God for sinners. It speaks of celibate love on the cross. It happened on Calvary, but its institution was the night before at his Last Supper where he also instituted the priesthood. He made the apostles priests to celebrate for the priestly people and hand on the event to posterity. "Through it [the sacrament of order] priests, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are signed with a special character and are conformed to Christ the Priest in such a way that they can act in the person

to pronounce "this is my body," "this is my blood," means that "the self of the priest is totally transparent to the self of Christ."

of Christ the Head" (PO, 2). Bread and wine are symbolic of the priest-victim Christ; they are changed to be his body and blood, the victim on the cross. For the priest to pronounce "this is my body," "this is my blood," means that "the self of the priest is totally transparent to the self of Christ."²⁹ Such transparency includes total self-donation to redeem humans and form Christ's spouse, the Church, the kingdom of God on earth. The revealed kingdom makes demands on, and challenges for, the disciples.

Benedict XVI draws an argument for celibacy by assimilation to Old Testament priests who abstained from sexual union whenever they were ministering. Now we have daily Mass:

This requires on their part exclusivity with regard to God. Consequently, this excludes other ties that, like marriage, involve one's whole life. From the daily celebration of the Eucharist, which implies a permanent state of service to God, was born spontaneously the impossibility of a matrimonial bond. We can say that the sexual abstinence that was functional was transformed automatically into an ontological abstinence.³⁰

THE SPIRITUALITY OF CELIBACY

Clerical celibacy is a matter of faith, to be accepted as a gift from God. One must have eyes fixed on Jesus and trust completely in him. Peter could walk on the water to Jesus, only if he kept his focus on him. Any presumption or lack of dependence on Jesus and he begins to sink. "You have so little faith . . . why did you doubt?" said Jesus (Matt 14:22-33).

The human person is necessarily a being-in-relation, physically, socially and spiritually. "It is not good for man to be alone." Celibacy makes crucial demands on sexuality. One experiences "loss of fulfillment of the sexual instinct" or "loss of fulfillment in the sexual area."³¹ "How can anyone resist the frequent vehement urges for [sexual] pleasures?" asks Kiesling.³² Chastity calls for the integration of sexuality into our lives as humans, both in the married state or single. Since sexuality must be integrated into human living, the celibate has to have good knowledge of sexuality. The wise celibate acknowledges, affirms, and accepts his sexuality. One can be at home in one's sexuality without abusing it. Even with temptations and the tendency to sin (*vitium concupiscendi*), St. Augustine advises: "Adopt a patient and loving struggle against that never-tamed habit of the flesh." This experience teaches humility. The celibate should not pretend to be a superman. Without faith, no miracle; the miracle of celibacy requires faith, obedience, and humility.

Chastity calls for the integration of sexuality into our lives as humans

The celibate should not pretend to be a superman

Sexual potency or energy can be at the service of marriage and of celibacy. The celibate knowing and accepting his sexuality has to know how to sublimate its energy. Conscience is an enormous area for study and formation in the celibate. St. John Cardinal Henry Newman called it the “aboriginal vicar of Christ.” East African Swihili calls it “*malaika wa roho*”—angel of the heart. All moral action demands consulting conscience. Conscience enlightened by faith is the ultimate norm to guide celibate life style. Mahatma Gandhi of India rightly called “pleasure without conscience” one of the seven capital sins of our age. Lived from conscience, celibate living is celebrated as a joyful feast when it enjoys insight and freedom. Celibacy imposed from outside the conscience becomes an unbearable burden. Conscience, the ultimate norm guiding man, is not absolute. With its spirit power, conscience can be open to something more than itself. Grace comes to conscience to help its upliftment. When this happens sexual nature opens to a happy coexistence with celibacy. An open dialogue is presumed such that fruitful cooperation results.

Both sexuality and celibacy are gifts, of nature and of grace respectively. They are gifts for love. Our divine master, Jesus, is both sexual and celibate

Both sexuality and celibacy are gifts, of nature and of grace respectively. They are gifts for love. Our divine master, Jesus, is both sexual and celibate. He is God and Love; his message is love, the kingdom of love. He invested all of himself, all his gifts, time and opportunities into making this kingdom a reality for us.

CONCLUSION

Sharing “a supernatural organic union with Christ,” the ordained is also priest and victim. This victimhood is manifest in his sacrificial celibate love and service. With Christ on the cross, in the Eucharist, the ordained stands on the vantage point to have a sense of sin. In the light of the Eucharist he sees what sin did to God and repents more. The celibate grows in the sense of God by frequent celebration of the Eucharist. This inspires in him the need for frequent confession of his own sins. It is no accident that on rising from the dead the first gift to the disciples was the Holy Spirit; Jesus gave the power to forgive sins in his hour of the Paschal mystery. This experience teaches the celibate humility and courage to keep striving for sinlessness.

It is unchristian to be discouraged by our sinfulness and failings. Jesus came for sinners. The scene of the wedding banquet he described was peopled with wounded and handicapped guests. We attend, ready to receive what he provides, including the wedding garment. He forgives and prays for our forgiveness. The celibate is aware of all this, and is not careless with all the Lord provides.

We see Christ’s life as goal directed—towards Jerusalem

to proclaim the kingdom of heaven by love. There we see his priesthood and his last supper. These are all connected and in service of the kingdom; they require faith, not rational or cultural experience. Likewise, celibacy which is not normal or in any cultural experience requires faith.

It is here one can consider the beauty of celibacy. Situated and connected with the Paschal mysteries for the kingdom of heaven, celibacy is beautiful. Detached and isolated, celibacy is ugly. The eye in its socket and hallowed by eyelashes is beautiful; pluck it from its place and put it on a dish, what a sorry site! The analogy may limp, but the point is that celibacy, dedicated for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, is beautiful.

Granted a proper spirituality, the celibate life style still remains painful, a challenge. Can the Church relax it for her priests? But the bride of Christ expects a bridegroom's service of love from her ordained priest. Pope Francis listened compassionately as a pastor to such difficulties in the Church of Amazonia in current days. The response of the Church remained the same: fidelity to the apostolic tradition of celibacy. Every age in church history had felt the stand hard, a challenge in difficult atmosphere. However, the worst of times turns out the best of times for God. For God, nothing is impossible; his grace abounds. With sufficient integral formation and adequate spiritual life, the clerical celibate will yield abundant spiritual fruit.

The response of the Church remained the same: fidelity to the apostolic tradition of celibacy

*Francis Edumalichukwu Okonkwo, C.S.Sp.
Holy Ghost Haven, Mgbidi, Nigeria*

ENDNOTES

1. The opposition was eventually relieved when the Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father did not mandate such ordination. However, the matter may come up in another platform, as Pope Francis entrusted the bishops of the area with the task of coming up with solutions adequate for their pastoral needs.
2. *From the Depths of our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy and the Crisis of the Catholic Church*. Ignatius Press, March 2020.
3. *Ibid.*, 84, 85.
4. Unless otherwise stated, Scripture is cited according to the *New American Bible, Revised Edition*, 2011.
5. NABRE translates as "a Christian wife," but the Greek is literally, "a sister, a woman."
6. See Galot, Jean, *Theology of the Priesthood*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984, 238.
7. *Ibid.*, 237.
8. Cardinal Stickler, Alfons Maria, *The Case for Clerical Celibacy: It's Historical & Theological Foundations*. Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1995, 28.
9. *Ibid.*, 12

10. I rely here on Collins, Adela Yarbro, “Ancient Christians on Marriage & Celibacy: Readings of 1 Corinthians 7 in the Early Church,” *Biblical Research* 64 (2019) 6–24.
11. *Ibid.*, 9.
12. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
13. *Episkopos* is literally “overseer.” At this point Christian communities were under presbyters/elders who in their capacity of pastoring the community were called overseers/bishops.
14. *Demonstratio evangelica* 1:9, cited in Stickler, *Clerical Celibacy*, 92.
15. Stickler, *Clerical Celibacy*, 106.
16. *Ibid.*, 17.
17. *Ibid.*, 22.
18. *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 2, chapter 23.
19. Stickler, *Clerical Celibacy*, 63; Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 249, note 47 concurs: “the intervention of Paphnutius at the Council of Nicea . . . may not be considered as historical”
20. Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 242. See also Stickler, *Clerical Celibacy*, 47.
21. Stickler, *Clerical Celibacy*, 62. However, there is no direct statement of this.
22. *Ibid.*, 24.
23. *Ibid.*, 33.
24. *Ibid.*, 45. This Council is wrongly interpreted as having introduced for the first time the general law of celibacy, with only unmarried men being admitted to the priesthood. It merely reemphasized the law of continence, though later legislation would still deal with married men ordained according, not contrary, to law. See Cholij, Roman, “Priestly celibacy in Patristics and in the history of the Church,” at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_01011993_chisto_en.html accessed May 12, 2020. Cholij is Secretary of the Apostolic Exarch for Ukrainian Catholics in Great Britain.
25. Stickler, *Clerical Celibacy*, 47. Cholij, “Priestly Celibacy,” note 64: “The Decretum Gratiani, part of the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, gave inaccurate information on the background to Eastern discipline.”
26. Stickler, *Clerical Celibacy*, 86, referring to Mathias Joseph Scheeben, *Die Mysterien des Christentums*. Mainz, 1931, 543–46.
27. Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 206.
28. O’Keefe, Mark, OSB., *In Persona Christi: Reflections on Priestly Identity and Holiness*. St. Meinrad School of Theology: Abbey Press, 1998, 35.
29. Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 209.
30. *From the Depths of Our Hearts*, 41.
31. Faricy, Robert, S.J., *Spirituality for Religious Life*. New York: Paulist Press, 1976, 44.
32. Kiesling, Christopher, O.P., *Celibacy, Prayer and Friendships*. New York, Alba House, 1977, 71.