Celibacy and the Children of Roman Catholic Priests. – Understanding the phenomenon of Catholic Celibacy in light of Children of Catholic Priests.

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The purpose of this paper is not to attack or undermine the practise of celibacy but to outline some truths surrounding this clerical phenomenon in terms of its credibility and the effects of the norm, i.e. celibacy as being absolute and unchallenged as being the norm. This paper will redefine or ‘co-define’ celibacy in terms of chastity suggesting an alternate celibacy exists alongside the traditional understanding of the term, outlining the consequent effects of same. “To perfect chastity in priestly celibacy [is] to be understood not on a merely anthropological terrain but rather on that of grace.” (The Congregation for the Clergy) It is assumed that chastity and celibacy are synonymous, however when a priest ‘falls short’ of the expectations of celibacy, yet outwardly maintains that he is celibate, he might be referred to as a ‘non chaste, celibate’ priest. He redefines celibacy thus, apart from its traditional understanding, giving it new meaning and dimensions that are contrary to its own genesis.

Pope Paul VI in his encyclical Sacerdotalis Celibatus outlines the benefits and reasoning’s behind the practise of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church. Coping International both respects and those who have given themselves to the celibate life completely, honouring it and its requirements, however we do not value or appreciate those who maintain that they are living life as a priest / religious in a chaste and celibate manner, whilst engaging in an ongoing sexual relationship. This surrounds all parties concerned, often a child, with a veil of secrecy so as to protect or maintain the priestly identity (individual and collective) as chaste and / or celibate. Consequently, this puts the priest’s right as a priest before the rights of others who may be involved, (woman & child for example.)

Pope Paul VI stated;

“We keenly regret. We speak of those who, retaining the sacred character conferred by their priestly ordination, have nonetheless been sadly unfaithful to the obligations they accepted when ordained. Their sad state and its consequences to priests and to others move some to wonder if celibacy is not in some way responsible for such dramatic occurrences and for the scandals they inflict on God’s People. In fact, the responsibility falls not on consecrated celibacy in itself but on a judgment of the fitness of the candidate of the priesthood which was not always adequate or prudent” (Pope Paul VI., 1967, p. 83) If this is indeed the case, and celibacy is not to blame, but the “judgment of the fitness of the candidate […] which was not always adequate or prudent” (Pope Paul VI., 1967, p. 83) is to blame for this resultant “sad state”, then the onus lies not only with the priest himself, but in part with his Bishop and indeed the lay faithful to a lesser degree also, since Pope Paul VI outlines that “a Bishop’s Kindness, Authority and Fatherliness, [and] Role of the Faithful” (Pope Paul VI., 1967, pp. 93 - 95) all play a part in ongoing formation of the priesthood.

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2 Pope Paul VI states “encourage your priests in every possible way to be your personal friends and to be very open with you. This will not weaken the relationship of juridical obedience; rather it will transform it into pastoral love so that they will obey more willingly, sincerely and securely.” (Pope Paul VI., 1967, 93.) Thus, If the fitness of the candidate […] was not […] adequate or prudent” then surely the means of support to ensure acceptable levels of fitness were likewise, inadequate, since the “[Bishop’s] fraternal and kindly presence must fill up in advance the human loneliness of the priest, which is so often the cause of his discouragement and temptations. (Pope Paul VI., 1967, 93.)” Thus, where a ‘non chaste celibate’ priest fathers a child, there exists an episcopal failing also and thus onus. This responsibility is echoed in Canon Law also, see ‘Confidentiality Agreements and
However, it has been the experience of many children of priests, where a priest breaks his celibacy vow, secrecy is imposed upon the women and the child inherits this secret, or is deceived as to their parentage, in an effort to veil the priest’s ‘indiscretions’, thus, he may maintain his priestly and celibate identity simultaneously.3 The problem of incredulity on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church toward ‘non chaste celibate’ priests, somewhat and further compounds the already existent onus of episcopal fraternal failing as mentioned, as it allows similar situations to occur ‘unnoticed’ or purposely unidentified, thus continuing the problem. A preference for silence exists here. Thus the preference of the maintenance of the illusion of celibacy directly contradicts not only the sacrificial nature of celibacy itself, but the natural law, owing both to mother and child involved. Whether or not the ‘judgement’ of the priest retains onus (and not celibacy itself) is not of primary concern. What is of concern is how many priests have broken their celibacy vow, imposed secrecy, fathered children and moved on? Since ‘expected discretion’ is the accepted norm. A new norm must be set.

There exists a belief system that one is alone in this situation, that numbers are low, i.e. that celibacy is almost absolute and unchallenged. Let us briefly turn our attention to this concern.

In 2012, there were 393,053 priests active … (Fr. Thomas Reese, 2015) compare this with statistics going back over 50 years and this figure jumps into millions of Catholic Priests worldwide. A 1987 study of a random sample of Catholic clergy in South Africa revealed that approximately 45% of priests reported being sexually active with an unspecified partner within the previous two years. (Kotze., 1987) The Vatican do not dispute these findings. In 1993, when presented with these findings by the BBC, Cardinal Jose Sanchez stated, “I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of those figures.” (Smith, 2012) This institutional acknowledgement underpins the notion of the ‘non chaste celibate’ priests. Coping International’s website has had hits from over 120 countries, and growing, since being launched in December 2014. However, what do these figures prove, if anything? It does not

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3 When discussion over priests’ children is used as a pretext for lampooning the celibacy rule it distracts attention away from what is the core ethical principle at the heart of the matter: that every child has a human right to know and be cared for by their natural parents. This right is itself based on the duty every parent has towards the wellbeing of their biological children (only in exceptional cases can a parent justly discharge this duty via an intermediary, i.e. by placing the child for adoption). It doesn’t matter whether the child was born into a regular or irregular union, or whether they were planned or not. A parent’s duties necessarily involve making themselves known to their child, supporting them financially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, and maintaining as good a relationship as is practicable with their child’s other parent. All the above applies to priests who have conceived a child. As Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio – now Pope Francis – said in 2010, ‘if a priest comes to me and tells me that he has gotten a woman pregnant…I remind him that the natural law comes before his right as a priest…just as that child has a right to his mother, he has the right to the face of his father.”’ Dr. Tom Finegan.


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prove anything, however it indicates that people have actively searched out sites/help relating to the issue of ‘Children of Priests’ and came to Coping International. It indicates further, that there exists a need for this service, and similar services today. It underlines the fact that priests are sexually active right now. Given that this is an Episcopal as well as a priestly failing and this failure is psychologically harming children (some priest’s children now are adults, but still denoted in terms of ‘child’) and women worldwide, one must consider the possibility of this in terms of the harm imposed. In 2015, 1.3% of the hits on www.copinginternational.com came from the following search phrase, “I am pregnant and the father is a Catholic Priest.” Thus, considering these figures … one is called to consider, in reality how many offspring of Catholic Clergy exist worldwide and have been fathered over the past 80 years? Consequently, the first question on celibacy ought not be, … should priests be allow to marry, but firstly … one ought to consider, to what degree are priest’s actually celibate and chaste, to begin with?

Many priests do leave the priesthood and enter marriage, and that is fine and acceptable, but there exists in total, it is the suggestion of Coping, three different brackets, with regard to Catholic Priests and celibacy.

i. Priests who remain celibate, wholly chaste without exception, honoring its requirements.
ii. Priests who leave the priesthood, perhaps having fallen in love, and who enter marriage.
iii. Priests who remain celibate ‘but not chaste’ and who engage in sexual relationships, often fathering children, causing hurt and inflicting secrecy.

It is the latter group that is of concern here. Whilst celibacy assumes chastity, it is necessary for the purpose of this brief paper to differentiate between the celibacy and chastity, since that is what is being done in practice. Where a priest does not remain chaste but assumes priestly celibacy outwardly for appearances sake, celibacy may be redefined in terms of its own nature, i.e. sacrifice. In these latter situations, celibacy itself acts as a means by which women may be sacrificed as opposed to it being a sacrifice within and of itself. When a priest is not chaste, the phenomenon of celibacy thus acts as a sort of contraceptive, for the prominence of celibacy and its given importance and associated, necessitated ‘discretions’, directly inhibit the priestly identity from being impinged or challenged in any way remaining absolute, purporting its own existence in spite of the opposite. Therefore, the woman bears the burden of living a lie, deceiving herself, family and friends, and worst of all her own child, imposing the same secrecy upon her child, so as to conceal the relationship with the priest/religious. Even though she may have made a consensual decision to enter into this relationship knowingly, children of priests have not, and thus a human rights violation and cause of concern from a prolife point of view, given natural law violation, becomes evident. This is a prime example of an adult putting their needs before the natural rights of a child. This nuanced and quite niche area of abuse is very burdensome as one carries the weight and responsibility of having to watch what you say, do and feel regarding familial situations. One may eventually personify the shame

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4 Key search phrases that people have searched arriving at Coping include (this is not an exhaustive list):
   i. Catholic Priests in Germany have children.
   ii. I am pregnant and the father is a Catholic Priest.
   iii. Counselling for children of priests.

5 However, there exists in part, a shame or “sad state” that surrounds priests who break their celibacy vow and leave the priesthood. This is another type of stigma in and of itself. The same stands for ex-nuns.
actualized by the same secrecy, wearing it, identifying with it. Over time, this has very negative effects on one’s wellbeing and psychological state of mind. Thus, clerical abuse exists, psychological and / emotional abuse. This ‘non chaste celibacy’ has not and is not been accounted for by the Roman Catholic Church, rather it has been overlooked and not concentrated upon.6

There exists no means by which to account for actual numbers of ‘non chaste celibate’ priests who have fathered children, their children, or women involved, other than to empower both the woman and child when and if they do speak out, encouraging them to do so. When they do so, it is essential that safeguards are already place so as to ensure their mental health, making suitable and appropriate provisions for them, when they account for the effect of imposed secrecy. Such provisions ought to be provided for by the Roman Catholic Church, since responsibility remains with the Roman Catholic Church, due to Episcopal failure, Priestly failure, imposition of secrecy and invoking an understanding of this situation where a priest has “been sadly unfaithful to the obligations he accepted when ordained” as a “sad state.” (Pope Paul VI., 1967, p. 83) This “sad state” unfortunately denotes the occasion of conception of a child (fathered by a Catholic Priest) in similar terms, hence associated taboos, stigmas and expected discretion. It associates the child with stigma owing to the insistence on the absoluteness of celibacy and thus any contradiction from this norm may be considered ‘unusual’ to say the least.

However, this is not about undermining celibacy but outlining the situation as it exists today and may have done so, for quite some time. For ‘non chaste celibacy’ absolutely and categorically contradicts and negates and sacrificial love supposedly imparted by the true nature of celibacy in its purest form to begin with. ‘Non chaste celibacy’ is evidenced by the existence of children of Catholic Priests, and the secrecy they underwent. ‘Non chaste celibacy’ contravenes actual celibacy. Least the two may be separated (celibacy & ‘non chaste celibacy’), sifting the ‘non chaste celibate’ from ‘celibate’ and associated dispositions of the former, there exists as a consequence a problem with celibacy and celibate, namely ‘non chaste celibacy’ which corrodes human rights and dignity to begin with undermining the “sacred character” of celibacy simultaneously.

6 The United Nations Children’s Rights Commission in February 2014 have stated:
33. The Committee is concerned about the situation of children fathered by Catholic priests, who, in many cases, are not aware of the identity of their fathers. The Committee is also concerned that the mothers may obtain a plan for regular payment from the Church until the child is financially independent only if they sign a confidentiality agreement not to disclose any information about the child’s father or the plan.
34. The Committee recommends that the Holy See assess the number of children fathered by Catholic priests, find out who they are and take all necessary measures to ensure that the rights of those children to know and to be cared for by their fathers is respected, as appropriate. The Committee also recommends that the Holy See ensure that churches no longer impose confidentiality agreements as a condition to providing mothers with financial plans to support their children.”

- **Concluding observations on the second periodic report of the Holy See.**
  http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/VAT/CRC_C_VAT_CO_2_16302_E.pdf
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Celibacy in its truest form and ‘non chaste celibacy’ exist side by side. The two intermingle and cooperate. The fraternal love and filial episcopal compassion is quite obviously lacking where ‘non chaste celibacy’ exists and “the sacred character” spoken about by Pope Paul VI now adopts a character that is offensive to both human rights and celibacy itself. It is ‘non chaste celibacy’ gives birth to problems as experienced by Children of Roman Catholic Clergy, given the assumed dominance of ‘non chaste celibacy’ over natural rights. The stance and disposition whereupon a priest has “been sadly unfaithful to the obligations he accepted when ordained” as a “sad state” also informs the unconscious ego and psyche of Catholicism, creating shame, stigma and taboo, forcing secrecy further into the lives of children of priests, their mothers and extended families.

Celibacy in its current form harms children who are fathered by Roman Catholic Priests and Religious. The UN CRC have called upon the Vatican to account for children of priests, and their welfare, this work has begun. Celibacy assumes an absoluteness, thus leaving little wiggle room for the occasion where a priest does father a child, thus associating with this conception, denial, shadows and secrecy. Celibacy in its current form associates and denotes the situation where a priest falls short of celibacy expectations as a ‘sad state’.

However, Pope Paul VI did offer a solution and a disposition to counteract the “sad state” that has wrongfully inflicted upon children of priests, their mothers and families, shame. “The Church is very conscious of the sad state of these sons of hers and judges it necessary to make every effort to avert or to remedy the wounds she suffers by their defection.” (Pope Paul VI., 1967, p. 84) Since we are all part of the church and ecclesia means people, then Paul VI’s sincere “effort to avert or to remedy the wounds she suffers by their defection” extends to the entire church surely, not merely the institution, and does not forsake the episcopal onus that contributed to this situation to begin with. It is for this reason that Coping commends the Church on its readiness to ‘remedy the wounds inflicted’ which undoubtedly do not exclude children of priests.

The fruits of celibacy can and should only be judged by God, fruits which ought to be made known in pastoral ministry as evidenced by the congregation to which the Catholic Priest ministers. However, as we stand, the juxtaposition of celibacy alongside ‘non chaste celibacy’ offers a preclusion to celibacy in its purest form, from achieving its end goal from an institutional, pastoral and eschatological point of view, since the existence of ‘non chaste celibacy’ corrodes the purity and depth and “sacred character” belonging to the original meaning of celibacy and least celibacy has so willingly lost its intrinsic character, it has been unknowingly redefined, in terms of selfishness, greed and lust all of which are masked beneath the thin veil of the Priestly garb.

If we are to be church, this clericalist disposition that does not want to admit that Priests’ are not absolutely celibate requires eradicating. This would indeed be an “effort to avert or to remedy the wounds she suffers by [priestly] defection.” For to keep up the sheen of clerical appearances, blinds natural law from stemming and growing in children, obfuscating God’s plan for that same child as fathered by the priest. To remain silent on the matter is to not act and to not act is to facilitate and buttress ‘non chaste celibacy’ which prefers itself to both the natural law and rights of children born to priests, and celibacy itself.
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To conclude, “how can we issue solemn declarations on human rights and the rights of children, if we then punish children for the errors of adults? If a child comes into this world in unwanted circumstances, the parents and other members of the family must do everything possible to accept that child as a gift from God and assume the responsibility of accepting him or her with openness and affection.” (Pope Francis, 2016, p. 2016) ‘Non chaste celibacy’ does exactly this… punishing children for the ‘errors’ of adults, indeed leaving almost all children of priests in a “sad state.”


Works Cited


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