

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of the Priesthood

Part 4: Celibacy¹

One summer, after returning home from seminary, I visited a friend of mine who was working at a department store. As he and I stood amidst the racks of clothing visiting about my first year of college seminary, one of his coworkers walked up. Andy politely introduced me to the young woman and told her that I was studying to be a priest. A look of tremendous concern came over her face and she drew very close to me and whispered, “Do you know priests can’t have sex?” I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to have some fun, so I responded in a loud voice, “You’ve got to be kidding me! When did they make up this rule?” The young lady walked away feeling as though she had saved me from a terrible mistake!

Celibacy is one of the most misunderstood aspects of Roman Catholicism today. Considering that volumes of books have been written on this important topic, I am not going to presume to be able to adequately address it in the course of a one-page article. However, I do want to elucidate on two important aspects of celibacy—poverty/patience and eschatology.

In its most concrete and daily experience, celibacy is about poverty and patience. The famous Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, pointed out that our world is not used to embracing poverty and patience. He used the illustration of the popular axiom, “A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.” Most of us live by this ideology. However, celibacy is completely contrary to it. Celibacy, by its very nature, proclaims to the world that patience, waiting for something greater that will eventually come, is greater than any immediate gift or pleasure. In his book, The Meaning of Christian Priesthood, Gisbert Greshake comments on Rahner’s illustration writing—

One who according to the Gospel lives without marrying is proclaiming “No, I prefer the two,” that is, prefer the coming kingdom of God. For “the two in the bush” are really believed in only when one releases the “one in the hand”... and before the “two in the bush” are caught.²

In this way, celibacy provides an amazing opportunity for priest, religious, and those consecrated to the single life to grow in poverty and patience. This does not mean, of course, that married people are not called to poverty and patience, but rather, they grow in poverty and patience in a slightly different way.³

Saint Paul tells us that “the structure of this world is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31). It is so easy for us to forget about this important fact. It is very easy for us to become consumed by the things of this world in a way that distracts us from what is most important—eternal life with the God who loves us beyond imagining. When men and women freely choose celibacy, it becomes an eschatological sign; it reminds us of the coming kingdom of God. For this reason, Saint Paul wrote—

I tell you, brothers, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully.

-1 Corinthians 7:29-30

While many people are confused about celibacy today, the need for greater spiritual poverty and patience, as well as the need for us to reflect on the end of life and eternity, reminds us of the importance of this beautiful gift!

¹ In honor of the “Year of the Priesthood,” announced by Pope Benedict, this is a twelve part series on the priesthood

² Gisbert Greshake, The Meaning of Christian Preisthood, 1989, pg. 125.

³ It’s important to note that even marriage involves periods of “celibacy,” that can help grow poverty and patience.