

Alter Christus

*“As an **alter Christus** (another Christ) the priest is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ... Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation” (Pope Benedict XVI)*

Monthly bulletin dedicated to all the Priests of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

This Month's Reading: *Robert Cardinal Sarah*

Dear Father,

This month I would like to share with you more extracts of the book *From the Depths of Our Hearts*, written by Pope Benedict XVI and Robert Cardinal Sarah. Last month we already read some extracts from Pope Benedict XVI.

This time Robert Cardinal Sarah is the one who will speak to us, and he will face a sensitive topic: priestly celibacy. Although we know that this practice has its origin in the Apostles, in these days, it is very much under attack. Unfortunately, a lack of knowledge of the history of the Church would like to present priestly celibacy only as a discipline imposed by the Church, which could be changed at

any moment. Also, some people dare to say that celibacy is one of the causes of the lack of vocations, and the abolition of it will make vocations arise. This is far from the truth! In this bulletin, Cardinal Sarah will deal with these objections and will show us the real and true meaning of our celibacy. He will underline the fact that the priest is an Alter Christus (another Christ), and for this very reason, he should live the same life that Christ lived: a celibate one. It is not just the discipline of the Church, but the deep and ontological union between the priest and Jesus that compels us to live a life in which we give ourselves fully to God and the Church.

April 2021

Cardinal Sarah knows very well that if we see priestly celibacy only as a discipline imposed by the Church, it can become a burden too heavy to carry. However, once we discover the beauty of conforming our life to that of Christ, celibacy becomes a treasure and a precious gift for us and the entire Church. Cardinal Sarah says: "We

want to make present through celibacy what the world does not want to see: God alone suffices. He alone can save us and make us fully happy."

God bless you!

Fr. Tomás Ravaioli, IVE
LCI Director

Author: Robert Cardinal Sarah

Cardinal Robert Sarah, Prefect of the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Archbishop emeritus of Conakry (Guinea), was born on 15 June 1945 in Ourous, Guinea. After middle school, he was obliged to leave home in order to continue his studies at the minor seminary in Bingerville, Ivory Coast. Following Guinea's independence in 1958, he returned home and completed his studies. He was ordained priest on 20 July 1969.

After his ordination, he earned a licentiate in theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and a licentiate in Scripture at the "Studium Biblicum Franciscanum" in Jerusalem.

On 13 August 1979, he was appointed Archbishop of Conakry at the age of 34, making him the youngest bishop in the world and called "the baby bishop" by John Paul II. He was consecrated on 8 December 1979.

On 1 October 2001, he was appointed secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

On 7 October 2010, Pope Benedict XVI appointed him president of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum".

On 23 November 2014 he was nominated Prefect of the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

Created and proclaimed Cardinal by Benedict XVI in the consistory of 20 November 2010..

Member of: Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples; Congregation for the Causes of Saints; and the Pontifical Committee for the International Eucharistic Congresses.



From the Book *From the Depths of Our Hearts*

By Robert Cardinal Sarah

Loving to the End

An Ecclesiological and Pastoral Look at Priestly Celibacy

How can we approach this subject without trembling? It is important to take our time and to open our souls to the breath of the Holy Spirit. The priesthood, to repeat the words of the *Curé of Ars*, is the love of the heart of Jesus. We must not make of it a subject of polemics, of ideological battle, or of political maneuvering. Nor can we reduce it to a question of discipline or of pastoral organization.

In these recent months, we have seen so much haste, so much excitement around the Synod on Amazonia. My bishop's heart is worried. I have met with many priests who are disoriented, disturbed, and wounded in the very depths of their spiritual life by the violent challenges to the Church's doctrine. I want to say to them again today: Be not afraid! As Benedict XVI recalled: "The priest is a gift of the Heart of Christ: a gift for the Church and for the world. From the Heart of the Son of God, brimming with love, flow all the

goods of the Church. From it originates, in particular, the vocation of those men who, won over by the Lord Jesus, leave all things to devote themselves without reserve to the service of the Christian people, after the example of the Good Shepherd."

Dear brother priests, I want to tell you the unvarnished truth. You seem lost, discouraged, overcome by suffering. A terrible sense of abandonment and loneliness grips your heart. In a world undermined by unbelief and indifference, an apostle inevitably suffers: a priest on fire with faith and apostolic love quickly realizes that the world in which he lives is, so to speak, upside down. Nevertheless, the mystery that dwells in you can give you the strength to live in the midst of the world. And every time the servant of "the one thing necessary" strives to put God at the heart of his life, it brings a bit of light into the darkness.

**The priesthood:
An Ontological Entrance
Into the “yes” of Christ the Priest**

If we reduce priestly celibacy to a question of discipline, of adaptation to customs and cultures, we isolate the priesthood from its foundation. In this sense, priestly celibacy is necessary for a correct understanding of the priesthood. “Part of the priesthood, moreover, is truly making oneself available to the Lord in the fullness of one’s being and, consequently, finding oneself totally available to men and women. I think celibacy is a fundamental expression of this totality”, Benedict XVI boldly declared to the clergy.

***The Pastoral and Missionary Urgency
of Priestly Celibacy***

As a bishop, I fear that the plan to ordain married men as priests might generate a pastoral catastrophe. It would be a catastrophe for the faithful to whom they would be sent. It would be a catastrophe for the priests themselves.

How could a Christian community understand the priest if it is not obvious that he is “removed from the common sphere” and “delivered over to God”? How could Christians understand that the priest gives himself to them if he is not entirely given over to the Father? If he does not enter into Jesus’ kenosis, annihilation, impoverishment? “*Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality*

with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:6-7). He emptied himself of what he was in an act of freedom and love. Christ’s abasement even to the Cross is not simply obedient, humble conduct. It is an act of self abandonment through love in which the Son delivers himself entirely to the Father and to humanity: this is the foundation of Christ’s priesthood. How, then, could a priest keep, preserve, and claim a right to a matrimonial bond? How could he refuse to make himself a slave with Jesus the priest? This total delivering of himself in Christ is the condition for a total gift of self to everyone. He who has not given himself totally to God is not given perfectly to his brethren.

What view of the priest will some isolated, poorly evangelized populations have? Is the intention to prevent them from discovering the fullness of the Christian priesthood? In early 1976, when I was a young priest, I traveled to certain remote villages in Guinea. Some of them had not had a visit from a priest for almost ten years, because the European missionaries had been expelled in 1967 by Sékou Touré. Nevertheless, the Christians continued to teach the catechism to the children and to recite their daily prayers and the Rosary. They showed a great devotion to the Virgin Mary and gathered every Sunday to listen to the Word of God.

I had the grace of meeting these men and women who kept the faith without any

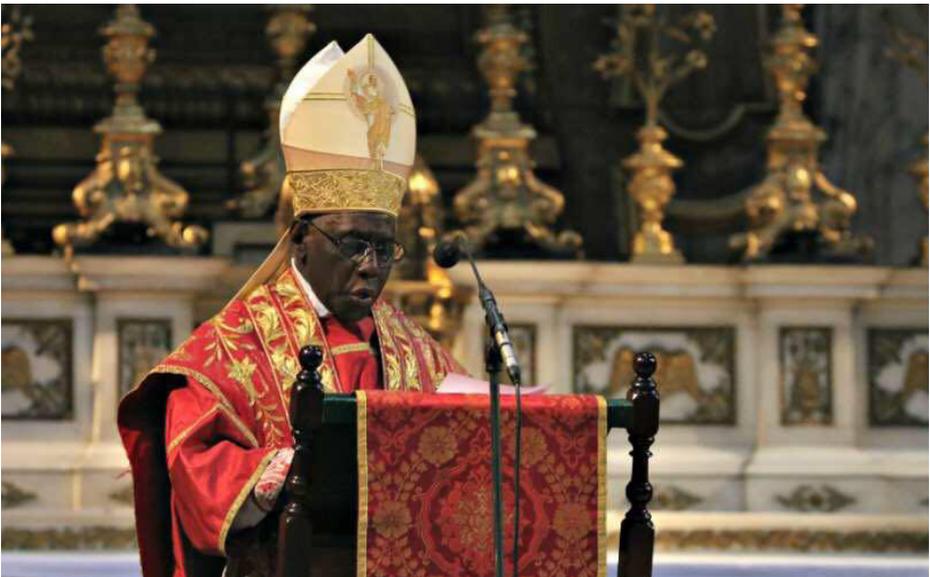
sacramental support, for lack of priests. They were nourished by the Word of God and kept their faith alive through daily prayer. I will never be able to forget their unimaginable joy when I celebrated Mass, which they had not experienced for such a long time. Allow me to state forcefully and with certainty: I think that if they had ordained married men in each village, the Eucharistic hunger of the faithful would have been extinguished. The people would have been cut off from that joy of receiving another Christ in the priest. For, with the instinct of faith, poor people know that a priest who has renounced marriage gives them the gift of all his spousal love.

How many times, while walking for long hours between the villages, with a briefcase-altar on my head, under the blazing sun, I myself experienced the joy of self-giving for the Church-Bride. While traveling

through swamps in a makeshift canoe, in the middle of lagoons, or while crossing dangerous torrents where we were afraid of being engulfed, I felt quite palpably the joy of being entirely dedicated to God and available, given over to his people.

How I would love it if all my confreres could someday experience the welcome of a priest in an African village that recognizes Christ the Bridegroom in him: what an explosion of joy! What festivity! The songs, the dances, the effusiveness, and the meals express the gratitude of the people for this gift of self in Christ.

The ordination of married men would deprive the young Churches that are being evangelized of this experience of the presence and of the visit of Christ, delivered and given in the person of the celibate priest. The pastoral tragedy would be immense. It



would lead to an impoverishment of evangelization.

I am convinced that if a large number of Western priests or bishops are willing to relativize the greatness and the importance of celibacy, it is because they have never had the concrete experience of the gratitude of a Christian community. I am not speaking simply in human terms. I think that in this gratitude there is an experience of faith. Poor and simple people are able to discern with the eyes of faith the presence of Christ the Bridegroom of the Church in the celibate priest. This spiritual experience is fundamental in the life of a priest. It cures him forever of all forms of clericalism. Having experienced it in the flesh, I know that Christians see in me Christ who is delivered for them, and not my limited person with its qualities and its many defects.

Without this concrete experience, celibacy becomes a burden too heavy to carry. I get the impression that for some bishops from the West or even from South America, celibacy has become a heavy load. They remain faithful to it but no longer feel that they have the courage to impose it on future priests and on Christian communities because they themselves suffer from it. I understand

them. Who could impose a burden on others without loving its deep meaning? Would that not be pharisaical?

Nevertheless, I am certain that there is an error of perspective here. Although it is sometimes a trial, priestly celibacy, correctly understood, is liberating. It allows the priest to become established quite consistently in his identity as spouse of the Church. A plan that consisted of depriving communities and priests of this joy would not be a work of mercy. As a son of Africa, I cannot in conscience support the idea that people who are being evangelized should be deprived of this encounter with a priesthood that is fully lived out. The peoples of Amazonia have the right to a full experience of Christ the Bridegroom. We cannot offer them “secondclass” priests.

On the contrary, the younger a Church is, the more she needs an encounter with the radical character of the Gospel. When Saint Paul exhorts the young Christian communities of Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae, he does not confront them with an unattainable ideal but, rather, teaches them all the demands of the Gospel: *“As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you*

The total delivering of himself in Christ is the condition for a total gift of self to everyone. He who has not given himself totally to God is not given perfectly to his brethren

were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (Col 2:6-8). In this teaching there is neither rigidity nor intolerance. The Word of God demands a radical conversion. It is incompatible with compromises and ambiguities. It is "*living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword*" (Heb 4:12). Following Paul's

example, we must preach with clarity and gentleness, without polemical harshness or half-hearted timidity.

Allow me to refer once again to my personal experience. In my childhood, I lived in a world that had barely emerged from paganism. My parents did not know Christianity until they were adults. My father was baptized two years after my birth. My grandmother received Baptism at the moment of her death. Therefore, I was well acquainted with animism and the traditional religion. I know the difficulty of evangelization, the painful uprooting and the heroic changes that neophytes must confront with regard to pagan customs, ways of life, and traditions. I imagine what the evangelization of my village would have been like if a married man had been ordained a priest there. The thought of it wrenches my heart. What

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sadness! I certainly would not be a priest today, because the radical character of the missionaries' life is what attracted me.

How dare we deprive peoples of the joy of such an encounter with Christ? I consider that a contemptuous attitude. Some have exploited and hardened the opposition between "pastoral care by visit" and "pastoral care of presence". The visit to a community by a missionary priest who has come from a distant land expresses the solicitude of the Universal Church. It is

the image of the Word visiting humanity. The ordination of a married man in the midst of the community would express the opposite movement: as if each community were bound to find the means of salvation within itself.

When the great missionary Saint Paul tells us about his visits to the communities in Asia Minor that he himself founded, he gives us the example of an apostle visiting the Christian communities in order to strengthen them.

God's mercy becomes incarnate in Christ's visit. We receive it with gratitude. For us it is an opening onto the whole ecclesial family. I fear that the ordination of married men who are responsible for a community might close that community in on itself and cut it off from the universality of the Church. How could anyone ask a married man to change his

community, while taking his wife and children along with him? How could he experience the freedom of a servant who is ready to give himself to everyone?

The priesthood is a gift that is received as the Incarnation of the Word is received. It is neither a right nor an obligation. A community that was formed according to the idea of a “right to the Eucharist” would no longer be a disciple of Christ. As its name indicates, the Eucharist is thanksgiving, a gratuitous gift, a merciful present. The Eucharistic presence is received with wonder and joy as an unmerited gift. Any believer who claims it as his due shows that he is incapable of understanding it.

I am persuaded that the Christian communities of Amazonia themselves do not think along the lines of Eucharistic demands. I think, rather, that these topics are obsessions that stem from theological milieus at universities. We are dealing with ideologies developed by a few theologians, or rather sorcerer’s apprentices, who wish to utilize the distress of poor peoples as an experimental laboratory for their clever plans. I cannot resolve to be silent and let them do so. I want to take up the defense of the poor, the little ones, these people

who have “no voice”. Let us not deprive them of the fullness of the priesthood. Let us not deprive them of the true meaning of the Eucharist. We cannot “tamper with

[trafiquer] the Catholic doctrine of the priesthood and celibacy in order to tailor make a response to the felt or alleged needs of some extreme pastoral situations”, Marc Cardinal Ouellet recently remarked. “Above all, I think that the Latin Church does not know her own tradition of celibacy, which goes back to apostolic times and was the secret and the driving force of her strong missionary expansion.” The

point we are talking about is of capital importance. Priestly celibacy is a powerful driving force of evangelization. It makes the missionary credible. More radically, it makes him free, ready to go anywhere and to risk everything because he is no longer detained by any place.

In Light of Church Tradition

Some will think that my reflection is mistaken. Some will tell me that priestly celibacy is only a discipline that was imposed at a late date by the Latin Church on her clerics.

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I have read such statements, which are repeated in many newspapers. Historical honesty obliges me to declare that they are false. Serious historians know that from the fourth century on, the councils recall the necessity of continence for priests. We must be precise. Many married men were ordained priests during the first millennium. But from the day of their ordination on, they were obliged to abstain from sexual relations with their wives. This point is regularly recalled by the councils, which rely on a tradition received from the apostles. Is it conceivable that the Church could have brutally introduced this discipline of clerical continence without causing a general outcry among those on whom it would be imposed? Now historians emphasize the absence of protests when the Council of Elvira, at the very beginning of the fourth century, decided to exclude from the clerical state those bishops, priests, and deacons who were suspected of engaging in sexual relations with their wives. The fact that such a demanding decision aroused no opposition proves that the law of clerical continence was not something new. The Church had just emerged from the period of persecutions. One of her first concerns was to recall a rule that may occasionally have been bent in the turmoil of the age of martyrs but was already well established.

Some commentators show terrible intellectual dishonesty. They tell us: there were married priests. That is true. But

they were obliged to practice complete continence. Do we want to go back to that state of affairs? The esteem in which we hold the sacrament of Matrimony and the better understanding that we have of it since the council forbid it.

The priesthood is a response to a personal vocation. It is the fruit of an intimate call from God, the archetype of which is God's call to Samuel (1 Sam 3). A man does not become a priest because it is necessary to fill a need of the community and someone has to occupy the "position". Priesthood is a state of life. It is the fruit of an intimate dialogue between God who calls and the soul that responds: "*Behold, I have come to do your will*" (Heb 10:7). Nothing can interfere with this heart-to-heart conversation. Only the Church can authenticate the response to it. I wonder: What will happen to the wife of a man who has been ordained a priest? What place will there be for her? Is there a vocation to be the wife of a priest? The priesthood, as we have seen, presupposes handing over one's whole life, delivering oneself up as Christ did. It presupposes an absolute gift of self to God and a total gift of self to the brethren. What place can be reserved, then, for the conjugal bond? Vatican Council II brought out the dignity of the sacrament of Matrimony as the proper path to sanctity through conjugal life. This state of life presupposes, however, that the spouses place the bond that unites them above all else. To ordain a married man a priest would amount to

diminishing the dignity of marriage and reducing the priesthood to a job.

What is to be said about the freedom to which the couple's children can legitimately aspire? Must they, too, embrace their father's vocation? How can anyone impose on them a way of life that they did not choose? They have the right to enjoy all the resources necessary for their flourishing. Will married priests have to be paid accordingly as a consequence?

One could argue that the Christian East has always been familiar with this situation and that it poses no problem. That is false. At a late date, the Christian East allowed married men who had become priests to have sexual relations with their spouses. This discipline was introduced at the Council in Trullo in 691. The novelty appeared as a result of an error in transcribing the canons of the council that had been held in 390 in Carthage. The major innovation of this seventh-century council, moreover, is not the disappearance of priestly continence but the limitation of it to the periods preceding the celebration of the Holy Mysteries. The ontological bond between priestly ministry and continence is still established and perceived. Does anyone want to go back to that practice? We must listen to the testimonies coming from the Eastern Catholic Churches. Several members of these Churches have clearly emphasized that the priestly state came

into tension with the married state. Over the past centuries, it has been possible for the situation to persist thanks to the existence of "families of priests" in which the children were educated to "take part" in the vocation of the father of the family and in which the daughters often married a future priest. A better appreciation of the dignity and of the freedom of each person makes this *modus operandi* impossible now. The Eastern married clergy is in crisis. Divorce by priests has become a cause of ecumenical tension among the Orthodox Patriarchates.

In the separated Eastern Churches, only the preponderant presence of monks makes association with a married clergy acceptable to the people of God. There are many Orthodox Christians who would never go to confession to a married priest. The *sensus fidei* causes the faithful to discern a form of incompleteness in the clergy who do not live out consecrated celibacy.

Why does the Catholic Church allow the presence of a married clergy in some Eastern Churches in union with Rome? In light of the statements of the recent Magisterium on the ontological bond between priesthood and celibacy, I think that the purpose of this acceptance is to foster a gradual development toward the practice of celibacy, which would take place, not by a disciplinarian path, but rather for properly spiritual and pastoral reasons.



Confusion in Understanding the Priesthood

I would like to continue this study by emphasizing how the ordination of married men would cause confusion and obscure the work that the Church has accomplished in promoting a better understanding of the priesthood.

What is an exception?

Someone might point out to me that there are exceptions already and that married men have been ordained priests in the Latin Church while continuing to live *more uxorio* [as married couples] with their wives. Yes, these are exceptions in the sense that these cases result from an uncommon situation that must not be induced to recur. So it is when married Protestant pastors enter into full communion [with the Catholic Church]

and are to receive priestly ordination. An exception is by definition transitory, an incidental occurrence in the normal and natural state of affairs. That is not the case with a remote region that lacks priests. The shortage of them is not an exceptional state. This situation is common in all mission countries and even in the countries of the secularized West. By definition, a nascent Church lacks priests. The early Church found herself in this situation. We have seen that she did not renounce the principle of clerical continence. The ordination of married men, even if they were permanent deacons before, is not an exception but a rupture, a wound in the consistency of the priesthood. To speak of an exception would be a misuse of language or a lie.

The lack of priests could not justify such a rupture, because, once again, it is not an exceptional situation. Moreover, the ordination of married men in young Christian communities would prevent

them from giving rise to priestly vocations of celibate priests. The exception would become a permanent state detrimental to the correct understanding of the priesthood.

Besides, the statement that the ordination of married men would be a solution given the shortage of priests is an illusion. Saint Paul VI already remarked:

“We are not easily led to believe that the abolition of ecclesiastical celibacy would considerably increase the number of priestly vocations: the contemporary experience of those Churches and ecclesial communities which allow their ministers to marry seems to prove the contrary.”

The number of priests would not be increased significantly. Instead, the correct understanding of the priesthood and of the Church would be permanently confused as a result.

Priestly Celibacy and Inculturation

Consequently, I would like to express my deep indignation when I hear it said that the ordination of married men is a necessity since the peoples of Amazonia do not understand celibacy or that this reality will always be foreign to their culture. I see in this sort of argument

a contemptuous, neo-colonialist, and infantilizing mentality that shocks me. All the peoples of the world are capable of understanding the Eucharistic logic of priestly celibacy. Are these peoples supposedly devoid of the instinct of the faith? Is it reasonable to think that God's grace would be inaccessible to the peoples

of Amazonia and that God would deprive them of the grace of priestly celibacy that the Church has guarded for centuries as a precious jewel? There is no culture that God's grace cannot reach and transform. When God enters into a culture, he does not leave it intact. He destabilizes and purifies it. He transforms and divinizes it. Why would there be in the most remote areas of Amazonia more difficulties in understanding priestly

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celibacy? Let us not be afraid if celibacy goes against the local cultures. Jesus tells us: “*I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*” (Mt 10:33). The contact between the Gospel and a culture that is unacquainted with it is always disconcerting. The Jews and the Greeks of the first centuries were surprised, too, by celibacy for the Kingdom. It is a scandal for the world and will always remain so because it makes present the scandal of the Cross.

Father Martin Lasarte says: “Is the lack of vocations to the priesthood and religious life in the Amazon a pastoral challenge or is it rather the consequence of theological-pastoral options that have not given the expected results or only partial results? In my opinion, the proposal of the *virii probati* as a solution to evangelization is an illusory, almost magical proposal that goes nowhere near to addressing the real underlying problem”.

In every region of the world, Christian communities encounter trials and difficulties, but evidence shows that wherever there is a serious, authentic, and continual evangelization activity, there is no lack of priestly vocations.

Along these lines, Pope Francis boldly affirms with lucidity and courage: “Many places are experiencing a dearth of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. This is often due to a lack of contagious apostolic fervor in communities which results in a cooling of enthusiasm and attractiveness. Wherever there is life, fervor and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise. The fraternal life and fervor of the community can awaken in the young a desire to consecrate themselves completely to God and to the preaching of the Gospel. This is particularly true if such a living community prays insistently for vocations

and courageously proposes to its young people the path of special consecration.”

The pope points out the basis for the problem: a lack of faith and of apostolic fervor. They have stopped proclaiming Christ. I am convinced that if we offer evangelization work to young people, the number of missionary vocations will rise.

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(Pope Francis)**

Alas, under the pretext of inculturation, wrongly understood, Catholics often are content to defend the rights of the indigenous peoples or to work to promote their economic development. This is not the heart of the mandate that Jesus gave us. He told us: “*Go*

therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). Thus we take great care of the indigenous populations, but not enough to proclaim to them the heart of our faith. I am ashamed to admit it, but the Evangelical Protestants are sometimes more faithful to Christ than we are. We have become specialists in the fields of social, political, or economic activity. Nevertheless, as Benedict XVI reminded us, “The faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter between man and God.”

Pope Francis very clearly explained this problem in his speech at the closing of the synod. He mentioned the necessary renewal of missionary zeal. He recalled very clearly that evangelization is the heart of the synodal reflection: what is at stake is the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ. And so, in order to respond to his appeal, by priestly celibacy “we want to go ahead and make present this scandal of a faith that bases all existence on God.” (Benedict XVI) In a new surge of evangelization, we want to make present through celibacy what the world does not want to see: God alone suffices. He alone can save us and make us fully happy.

Toward a Radically Evangelical Priesthood

The priesthood is going through a crisis. Detestable scandals have disfigured its face and unsettled many priests throughout the world. Now within the Church, crises are always overcome by returning to the radical character of the Gospel, and not by adopting worldly criteria.

Celibacy is a scandal for the world. We are tempted to tone it down. On the contrary, Saint John Paul II maintained that it is necessary to rediscover that “the

Spirit, by consecrating the priest and configuring him to Jesus Christ, head and shepherd, creates a bond which, located in the priest’s very being, demands to be assimilated and lived out in a personal, free and conscious way through an ever richer communion of life and love and an

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ever broader and more radical sharing in the feelings and attitudes of Jesus Christ. In this bond between the Lord Jesus and the priest, an ontological and psychological bond, a sacramental and moral bond, is the foundation and

likewise the power for that ‘life according to the Spirit’ and that ‘radicalism of the Gospel’ to which every priest is called.”

We will not solve the crisis of the priesthood by weakening celibacy. On the contrary, I am convinced that the future of the priesthood lies in Gospel radicalism. Priests must live out celibacy and a kind of poverty. They are called to it in a special way. Celibacy, poverty, and fraternity lived out in obedience by priests are not only means of personal sanctification; they become signs and instruments of a specifically priestly life: “The priest is called to live these evangelical counsels in accordance with those ways and, more specifically, those goals and that basic meaning which derive from and express his own priestly identity.” (John Paul II)

The logic of disappropriation resulting from celibacy must go so far as obedience and the renunciation of property in poverty. Benedict XVI states this forcefully: “Without such a forsaking on our part there is no priesthood. The call to follow Jesus is not possible without this sign of freedom and renunciation of any kind of compromise.”

The full concept of priesthood includes a life led according to the evangelical counsels. I think that it is time for bishops to take concrete steps to propose this “fully priestly” life to their priests, a common

life in prayer, poverty, celibacy, and obedience. The more priests live the radical character of the Gospel, the more consistent their identity and their everyday life will be. There is a work of reform to undertake here, in other words, a return to the sources. I am not confusing priestly life and religious life. I solemnly declare that the priesthood is a state of life that involves an existence given and consecrated in truth.

A life led according to the world can produce in a priestly soul only a feeling of inconsistency, incompleteness, and being torn apart. “*No one can serve two masters*” (Mt 6:24).

“Without such a forsaking on our part there is no priesthood. The call to follow Jesus is not possible without this sign of freedom and renunciation of any kind of compromise.”
(Pope Benedict XVI)

Dear brother priests, allow me to address you directly. Sexual scandals erupt at a regular pace. They are broadcast far and wide by the social networks. They cover us with shame because they directly call into question our promise of celibacy in imitation of Christ. How can we bear the fact that some of our brothers could profane the sacred innocence of children? How could we hope for any missionary fruitfulness if such atrocities are committed in secret? Some of you are crushed by work. Others celebrate in

empty churches. I wish to remind all of you: the experience of the Cross reveals the truth of our life. In proclaiming God’s truth, you get onto the Cross. Without you, humanity would be less great and less beautiful. You are the living rampart of the truth because you agreed to love it even to the Cross. You are not the defenders of an abstract or partisan truth. You have decided to suffer for love of Jesus Christ. All of you, hidden and forgotten priests, you whom society sometimes despises, you who are faithful to the promises of your ordination, you cause the powers of

this world to tremble. You remind them that nothing can resist the force of the gift of your life for the sake of truth. Your presence is unbearable to the prince of lies.

Celibacy reveals the very essence of the Christian priesthood. To speak about it as an accessory reality is hurtful to all the priests in the world. I am firmly convinced that relativizing priestly celibacy is tantamount to reducing the priesthood to a mere function. Now, the priesthood is not a function, but a state of life.

Final words

The Mass is the priest's reason for existing. The renewal of the Sacrifice of Calvary is not only the most important and the loftiest action of his day, but the one that confers all its meaning on it. The saintly Curé of Ars often repeated with tears in his eyes: "Ah! How terrifying it is to be a priest!" Then he would add: "How sad it is when a priest celebrates Mass as though it were an ordinary thing. How far astray a priest without an interior life has wandered!"

Dear priests, dear seminarians, let us not allow ourselves get caught up in haste, activism, and the superficiality of a life that gives priority to social or ecological commitment, as though time dedicated to Christ in silence were lost time. It is precisely in prayer and adoration in front of the tabernacle that we find the indispensable support for our virginity and our priestly celibacy.

Let us not become discouraged: prayer demands an effort. It involves a kind of hand to hand combat, an arduous struggle with God, like that of Jacob, who wrestled the whole night until the dawn (Gen 32:22-32). Sometimes we get that painful impression that Jesus is being silent, because he is working in the utmost secrecy. Let us be diligent in our prayer of adoration, and let us teach it to the Christian faithful by the example of our lives. In order to encourage priests to have an intimate relation with the Lord, Saint Charles Borromeo always used to say: "You will not be able to care for the souls of others if you let your own perish. In the end you will no longer do anything even for others. You must always have time for being with God."



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