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**Why Celibacy?**

**Chris McDonnell  February 25th 2022**

**La Croix International**

Following the death of a good man, Bishop Edward Daly, who went to the Lord on August 8th 2016 there was an appreciation of his life published on the website of the Association of Catholic Priests, ACP, the forum of Irish priests that has been a voice for reform within the Irish Church. Written by Fr. Paddy O’Kane, who knew Edward Daly, his words reflect on the many facets of his life, a well-rounded man in his appreciation of others.

One issue that Edward Daly addressed in his book, *A Troubled See,* concerned the matter of celibacy as a necessary condition for ordination to the priesthood. I make no apology for the length of the following quotation from his book, pages 269-70:

*‘I ask myself, more and more why celibacy should be the great sacred and unyielding arbiter, the paradigm of the diocesan priesthood. Why not prayerfulness, conviction in the faith, knowledge of the faith, ability to communicate in the modern age, honesty, integrity, humility, a commitment to social justice, a work ethic, respect for others, compassion and caring?*

*Surely many of these qualities are as at least as important in a diocesan priest as celibacy – yet celibacy seems to be perceived as the predominant obligation, the sine qua non.  Celibacy is an obligation that has caused many wonderful potential candidates to turn away from vocation, and other fine men to resign their priesthood at great loss to the Church.*

*The quality of some of those whom we have lost to the priesthood has always been a cause of great sadness for me.  Some of the most heart-breaking moments during my years as bishop were when priests came to me saying they could no longer live a celibate life and wished to resign from the active priesthood.  One of the finest laymen, whom I have ever met, a man who served this country with huge distinction, once seriously contemplated the priesthood and decided to go in another direction, solely because of the rule of celibacy.*

*I ask in all charity, is it not time for our Church to make a vocation to the priesthood possible and accessible for more men?  Something needs to be done and done urgently and I hope the senior members of the clergy and laity make their views more forcefully known, views that are often expressed privately but seldom publicly.*

*Preachers must be harvested to serve in this new millennium, priests drawn from our diocese to serve in our diocese.  There is certainly an important and enduring place for celibate priesthood.  But I believe that there should also be a place in the modern Catholic Church for a married priesthood and for men who do not wish to commit themselves to celibacy.’*

They are words that demand serious consideration for they come from someone with considerable pastoral experience both for priests in his diocese and the laity they ministered to.

The coming synod called by Francis must address this issue. That discussion could prove vital for the Church in coming years. It is long overdue. It was not on the table for discussion at the Council and it was only in June 1967 that Paul VI issued the encyclical ‘*SACERDOTALIS CAELIBATUS – on the celibacy of the priest’.* That encyclical re-stated the norm of celibacy within the Western Church and we went our way.

The next ten years were to see many leave the priesthood to marry and as Bishop Daly notes, good men were lost to the ministry of priesthood.

Discussion of the issue was a closed book during the papacy of John Paul II. In fact, it is only very recently that a respectable discussion could be held without it being presumed that those taking part were not in some way heretical! The distinction between doctrine and discipline blurred and the finer points were lost.

The synod, if it is called to consider the issue of celibacy, must look at current circumstances and not seek to retreat into historical cul-de-sacs. In our time we are faced with a diminishing number of priests, losing those in advanced years unable to continue in ministry and finding that the number entering the seminaries does not in any way match need.

There is no implicit reason that demands a celibate priesthood, there is every argument to support a married clergy working amongst the people, not to mention that the freedom to marry should be a matter of choice.

Celibacy for a monk is evidently part and parcel of his vocation, different in so many aspects from that of secular clergy. We need to re-examine, with a degree of urgency why monastic practice extends to parish life.