Letters to The Tablet: January & February 2020

02 January 2020

**Historic abuse**

While church hierarchies seem unable to acknowledge a disastrous record in defending the vulnerable from predatory priests (“The survivors’ tales”, 14 December), we must not allow the view of some Catholics that these problems have arisen largely as a result of modern-day permissiveness.

In the twelfth century the first known teacher of theology at Oxford, a married priest, Thibaut d’Estampes, left France with his family because of the growing demands there that priests be celibate. In a letter he wrote that if the Church insisted that priests be celibate then some would resort to pederasty. Such a simple view must have been widespread then, and discounted.
**John Prangley**
Oxford

**16 JANUARY 2020, THE TABLET**

**Topic of the week: Has Benedict forgotten something?**

I wonder what on earth Pope Emeritus Benedict is up to. Apart from the impropriety of speaking out on the issue of clerical celibacy in a way that is bound to make life more difficult for his successor, the Pope Emeritus seems to forget that it was he who set up the Ordinariate (though without much consultation it seems) that allows former Anglican priests, including married priests, to continue their ministry in the Catholic Church.
In saying that celibacy allows an ordained priest to concentrate fully on his ministry and that “it does not seem possible” for a married priest “to carry out the two vocations simultaneously”, does he now think that creating the Ordinariate was a big mistake?

Is Benedict just ignorant of the considerable number of married priests in the UK and among the Greek Catholics in Eastern Europe, where marriage is the norm? If not ignorance, then it would be a case of a knowing insult directed towards these men and also the many non-Catholic ministers who he clearly thinks are not capable of doing their job properly – because they are married.

**Geoffrey Turner**
Harrogate, North Yorkshire

There is nothing to disagree with in Joanna Moorhead’s column. And yes, solving the “Women’s Issue” might help resolve the various scandals bedevilling our Church.

The problem, of course, is men; celibate men; powerful celibate men. Remove the celibacy ruling and within no time the current anachronistic attitude to women in the Church of Rome will be viewed with blinking incredulity.

**Eileen Fitzpatrick**
Ilkley, West Yorkshire

23 January 2020

**Benedict on celibacy**
Intentionally or not, Benedict XVI’s reported remarks stating that clerical celibacy is a requirement for priestly ministry continue a very hurtful and damaging lie propagated for much too long.

Supposedly, unlike the married state, celibacy allows one to be “fully at the disposal of the Lord” and thus “has become a criterion for priestly ministry”. As an Eastern Catholic priest, married with three adult children, I have simply had enough of this absurdity.

To conflate clerical celibacy with the priestly vocation is historically, sacramentally, and theologically unfounded. The priestly ministry absolutely involves fully sharing one’s life and one’s faith journey with the people of God. That vocation is lived out regardless of one’s married state. Both the celibate and married states provide valuable lenses through which the Spirit touches our humanity and calls forth holiness.

And no, Cardinal Sarah, the sacrament of marriage does not mean that I am a second-class priest. Were that the case, perhaps the Soviet authorities would have spared thousands of married Ukrainian Greco-Catholic priests and their spouses, rather than murdering them or exiling them to the Siberian Gulag in the regime’s unsuccessful attempt to destroy our Church.

(Prof. Emeritus) Myroslaw Tataryn
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

We keep going over the same questions about celibacy and marriage, with no progress.

Twenty-seven years ago (3 July 1993) I wrote an article for The Tablet called “Vocations in conflict”. In it I recounted the evidence for my vocation to the priesthood and my vocation to marriage. In this corner of Essex we have several parishes with married priests; these former Anglican priests believe that they have a vocation to the Catholic priesthood and a vocation to marriage.

Many parishioners ask: “How can the former Anglican priests have a wife and family and minister in our parishes but you are not allowed to?” I concluded my article by asking “any reader to explain to me through the letters columns how the former Anglicans can have two vocations and the rest of us only one”. I’ve yet to see an explanation.

**Tony Castle**
Great Wakering, Essex

There will be much said abut the advocacy of compulsory celibacy by Benedict and Cardinal Sarah, but what stands out for me is the lack of pastoral experience in the careers of both men.

There is a place for scholarship in religion, but scholars are notoriously ill-informed about daily living. Is there any prospect of a variation on the Sabbatical principle, so that every ordained minister must spend one year in seven working as a pastor in a context far removed from their place of residence, and preferably in a difficult economic context?

**Tiernan Peter MacNamara**
Thornton-le-Street, North Yorkshire

29 January 2020

**Benedict on celibacy**
I fear you missed the point of Pope Benedict’s words in your editorial (“Another veiled attack on Francis”, 18 January). He may say that marriage and priesthood are incompatible but it is because both vocations involve total surrender, one to God and being available to every one of his sheep; the other to God through commitment to one person, our spouse.

We are no longer ourselves but one person with our spouse. We therefore no longer exist as an individual completely available to the flock.

It is perhaps a modern lack of commitment to the total surrender of marriage which leaves us thinking that there would still be time, energy and absolute availability to be priests as well. Let’s celebrate marriage as a true vocation in its own right and perhaps more of them will survive.

**(Dr) Catherine Mangham**
Shrewsbury

Cardinal Sarah’s insistence on the discipline of priestly celibacy would seem to focus on its purported value for the priest concerned, rather than on its impact on the laity he’s ordained to serve.

Is it better for the people of Amazonia to celebrate the Eucharist with a celibate priest at most once a year or with a married priest perhaps once a month? We have only to read the gospels to find the answer. There are numerous examples of Christ putting the needs of the people before the strict observance of the law.

**Margaret Smart**
Brighton

**Male narrative**
While I think it absurd that long ago women were not ordained into the Church, a degree of compassion needs extending to men (and women) opposed to it.

Their psychological narrative is based on the idea of the heroic celibate male fighting for Jesus’ Church. If women are allowed to become priests, that narrative collapses. It is only with such understanding that the Church and Pope Francis will finally be able to prosecute this much-needed reform.

**Ben Haughton**
Edinburgh

**08 February 2020**

**The call to celibacy**
Christopher Lamb (“An unseemly ruckus in Rome”, 25 January) reminds us that celibacy is not essential to ordination but a discipline. It has not always been imposed, and is not imposed on Eastern Rite priests or former Anglicans and Lutherans.
Questions remain, though. If it is not essential, then why impose it? If it is a real calling to give more availability, as in St Paul’s statements, then let it be so. Many will be so called. In my experience as a married priest, the vast majority of celibate priests honour my state, are not envious, and would have things no other way for themselves.

Could the Church not follow a similar system to the Orthodox, whereby seminarians are assumed to embrace celibacy unless they are already married or become so close to their ordination? Even then should there be consideration of those who seek to marry subsequently though they never could have foreseen that? None of this would undermine celibacy at all. It may even strengthen it as it is so deeply and personally followed.

**(Fr) Kevin O’Donnell**
Hove, East Sussex

13 February 2020

**Married priests**
Cardinal Sarah considers that the ordination of married men for the Amazon would be a profound insult to the people of the Amazon themselves (Books, 8 February). If indeed the aim of this suggestion is to allow some theologians to “test their weird and dangerous theories” he has, as your reviewer concludes, “a point that merits recognition”.

I am a married priest celebrating this year my silver jubilee of Catholic ordination. I have never felt it right to enter into the debate about married priests; all I could do was to seek to exercise my ministry, with great gratitude for the privilege, as faithfully as I could. Any judgement must be left to others.

However, it occurs to me that in Great Britain in the last 40 years there may have been more experience of the actual working out of a married Catholic priesthood than anywhere else in the world, and in a context where it could hardly be described as the testing of a dangerous theory at the expense of a vulnerable community. Would some assessment of this experiment now be helpful?

**(Fr) Paul King**
Oxford

20 February 2020

# Topic of the week: This Pope cannot ignore synods

Response to the papal exhortation, Querida Amazonia, has been predictable: criticism from those who had hoped for a (modest) relaxation in the discipline of celibacy in the case of the viri probati, and criticism likewise from those who had expected an enhancement of the role of women in the Church. Both of these had been called for during last year’s Synod on the Amazon, the ordination of the viri probati by a substantial majority of the bishops taking part.

The response of apologists for Pope Francis has been equally predictable, if distinctly convoluted. To my mind, however, both critics and apologists miss the point.

Pope Francis has made “synodality” a key to his reforming pontificate. But what is the purpose of a synod, any synod, if its clear recommendations are – as in this case – simply ignored? If the apologists are correct in their interpretation then the best than can be said about Querida Amazonia is that it has been a PR disaster. But if my understanding of the centrality to this pontificate of synodality is correct, then the Pope himself has torpedoed one of his own chief initiatives in his attempt to reform the governance of the Church. It simply won’t do.

**Michael J. Walsh**
London N4

It is now widely recognised that an acute shortage of priests, certainly in the UK and Ireland, has brought us way beyond crisis point. Many believe, as I do, that the spectacular failure of compulsory celibacy bears much of the blame for our present staffing problems.

These things aside, I would respectfully suggest that, in the light of the sad colonial history of those regions, the very last thing Amazonia needs is yet another massive invasion of gringo celibates.

**Edward Butler**
Derrydruel Upper, Co. Donegal, Ireland

27 February 2020

**Celibacy debate**
The articles by Tina Beattie, Catherine Pepinster and Austen Ivereigh (22 February) on waiving mandatory celibacy are superb. I wonder if it might help the debate if I record an imaginary conversation that I or any other mother might have with her son today?

If he came and said, “Mum, I love God so much I don’t want to marry but give my life to him entirely,” I would rejoice at such a choice.

If he came and said, “Mum, I fancy a career where one of the conditions is that I should agree never to marry, and know that if I do I will lose my job,” I would say, “Don’t touch it. That is an outrageous condition; indeed it is contrary to human rights.”

If he then replied, “Don’t worry Mum, I’m gay,” I’d say, “OK, but what happens if you fall in love with another chap?”

“I’d keep it secret as might a chap who falls in love with a girl once he is ordained.”

I might reply, “That is rather hypocritical, isn’t it?”

**Elizabeth Price**
Linton, Kent

**Married priest gagged**
Fr Paul King (Letters, 15 February) is eminently sensible in proposing an assessment of the working of married clergy in the UK. But this might be hard to achieve.

At a social function a couple of years ago I met a married Ordinariate priest with children. I suggested he was in a privileged position to make a real contribution to the celibacy question – explaining the benefits of his family life, while he fulfilled his mission devotedly as a busy city parish priest. Couldn’t he help Catholic bishops, priests and people see the potential blessings in his situation, that were not available to his colleagues?

He told me that it was a strict condition of his being allowed into the Catholic priesthood that he should not discuss this issue with anyone, and that he had signed a document to this effect. Whatever happened to openness, dialogue and transparency in our Church?

**Jean Riordan**
Birmingham