Letters to The Tablet: March & April 2020

04 March 2020

Apologies from the Pope, from bishops for cover-ups, belated attention to victims, but when is there going to be an acknowledgment that the underlying causes of abuse are in the Church’s skewed attitudes to sex, sexuality, gender? Now is the time, when Jean Vanier, who has done so much good, is pronounced an abuser, to face up to what is obvious: it is not just individuals who are wrong but the institution which has bred them.  
  
The Church needs to embrace women with all their intellectual and spiritual vigour into the structure of the Church, and men who wish to be priests but not celibate, should be free to embrace their partners in full sexual and emotional union.  
  
**Marjorie McDaid**  
London N16

12 March 2020

**Chosen celibacy**  
I felt quite offended by Edward Butler (Letters 22, February) when he implied that my celibacy was “compulsory”; it wasn’t. I had a totally free choice whether to embrace it with the priesthood God clearly invited me to; or whether to continue with the mechanical engineering career I loved, and probably get married.  
  
**(Fr) BOB RAINBOW**  
PORTHMADOG, GWYNEDD

25 March 2020

The Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann (Tablet Interview, 21 March) spoke for millions of Catholics when he expressed disappointment with Pope Francis’ declaration following the Amazon synod: “He wants not to ordain viri probati or female deacons. He will lose the women, and without the women you cannot keep the Church alive.”  
  
It is without apology or pause that Catholic women must call out Pope Francis’ inaction.  
  
**Eileen Fitzpatrick**  
Ilkley, West Yorkshire

**Lay leadership**  
The negative experiences of lay leadership shared by Dr Jane Yeomans (Letters, 7 March) are not typical, but we do need to encourage more lay leadership, so as to avoid becoming increasingly dependent on priests from overseas, which seems selfish and short-sighted.  
  
While many dioceses continue to encourage men to consider the diaconate, there is little encouragement for the development of trained lay leaders for our parishes.  
In my own diocese of Hallam and my deanery of Doncaster we have been richly blessed with deeply committed deacons over many years. But in emphasising the role of deacon, we are missing a wonderful opportunity to grow our own parish lay leaders, be they male or female, married or single.  
  
I speak as a recently retired lay parish co-ordinator, appointed by my bishop for a four-year term to “be responsible for co-ordinating the liturgical, spiritual and pastoral care of the people of the parish”.  
  
All aspects of our parish mission were enthusiastically and capably led by parishioners, including funeral services, services of Word and Communion, sick visiting, catechesis, outreach, evangelisation and of course all aspects of finance and maintenance.  
  
During that time we were blessed to have a retired priest happily travelling 30 miles to celebrate our weekly Eucharist. It was good for him and good for us. Our parish priest, with canonical responsibility for five other parishes, happily joined us once a month or so.  
  
It worked! The role of lay leader was welcomed and accepted.  
  
Until the day the Holy Spirit inspires the Church to have a different understanding of priesthood or opens the ordained priesthood to married men and women, lay leaders enable our communities to be vibrant centres of Christian love, care and mission.  
  
**Frank J. McDermott**  
Doncaster, South Yorkshire

07 April 2020

**Paul’s wife**  
Nicholas King’s review (Books, 21 March) alludes briefly to the marriage of Paul and Thekla.   
  
The Greek Orthodox Church has preserved much evidence of this, partly on the island of Cyprus and partly on the Mediterranean coast of Italy. Thekla has, however, been buried under the carpet in the West. Michael Knowles’ frustration is understandable, as a passion for justice is deeply embedded in Deuteronomic thinking, and inherited by Jesus’ own role as a prophetic Jewish figure.   
  
**Janine Fitzpatrick**  
University of Glasgow   
InterFaith Chaplaincy

14 April 2020

**Lonely priests**  
We are all, in different ways, affected by the Covid-19 emergency. But there is one particular group of whose situation I am particularly aware – our priests. Often living solitary and lonely lives because of the Church’s persistent obduracy and lack of courage regarding the celibacy rules, their isolation is more striking during this period of lockdown, which may continue for some time.  
  
Many of us choose to live on our own of course, but in the case of our priests theirs is not a totally free choice; they renounce the possibility of the mutual companionship and support that a partner can provide in order to give the wider community spiritual support.  
  
I was prompted to write to you as we are very fortunate to have a priest who is combining spiritual solace with practical support of all kinds, from offers of organising help with shopping, providing lists of helpful local information, and, heroically, making an offer of a listening ear on the phone should feelings of isolation threaten to overwhelm us.  
  
Easter is a time of new beginnings. Please, let the Church think again about the compulsory celibacy rules, made even more incomprehensible by the setting up of the Ordinariate for former Anglican priests, many of them married.  
  
**Mary Lorigan Stanford**  
Newcastle upon Tyne

Some correspondents write as if marriage diminished a man’s commitment to serving God, yet in every other field we prefer experience to theory. St Paul advised men not to marry – all men, not just church elders – when he thought the Parousia was imminent. Later he said: “How can any man who does not know how to manage his own family have responsibility for the church of God?”  
  
God said it was not good for man to be alone, and had no problem with men’s sexual needs. Abraham, Moses and David were all polygamists, and Solomon was not blamed for having a harem, but for letting his wives lead him to idolatry. Moses might have needed a wife to help him in bearing the constant murmurings and idolatry of his flock, and many isolated priests today might not be driven to drink or worse if they had the comfort of a wife and children.  
  
Jesus condemned those who put insupportable burdens on men’s shoulders, and it seems as if celibacy is just such a burden. Some have made a hard choice and left the priesthood; a few have secretly fathered children, or, worse, abused them, causing scandal.  
  
**(Sr) Mary Paul OSC**  
Arkley, Hertfordshire

30 April 2020

**Not so lonely**  
Doubtless the sentiments expressed by the writers of the two letters under the title “Lonely priests” (Letters, 18 April) were prompted by concern for us priests, but they also view our celibate lives as a problem we are struggling with.  
  
The compulsory celibacy of Latin rite diocesan priests is debated by some Catholics. But I want to reassure your readers that, for very many of us, it is not true to suggest that embracing priestly celibacy was “not a totally free choice” – even less that it is an “insupportable burden”.   
  
Over forty years, like many priests of my acquaintance, I have had to grow deeper into the commitment I undertook at ordination, to follow the Lord and serve his people as a celibate.   
  
There are indeed challenges in this way of life, as there are in fidelity in marriage too, and some have not lived out commitments they initially made.  
  
We diocesan priests do lead solitary lives but they are not necessarily lonely. Indeed, the extraordinary circumstances of the current lockdown may be less challenging to us than to many. Like many another parish priest, I have been the recipient of tremendous support, encouragement, and indeed practical help from my parishioners, which expresses the community we share and leaves me far from lonely. I hope I succeed in offering a similar concern to them.   
  
**(Mgr) Timothy Galligan**  
London SW11