



Bl Mother Teresa of Calcutta

MOTHER TERESA ON CELIBACY

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta has spoken beautifully about priestly celibacy: "Just as God our Father prepared a worthy dwelling place for his Son in the immaculate womb of a virgin – so it is fitting that a priest prepares himself to take the place of Jesus, the Son of God, by freely choosing priestly celibacy. Marriage and procreation are miracles of God's love by which men and women become his co-workers, to bring new life into the world. But Jesus has clearly spoken of something even greater than that, when he said that in heaven people neither marry nor are given in marriage but live like the angels; and that there are some who have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of God.

"Priestly celibacy is that gift which prepares for *life in heaven*. Jesus calls his priest to be his co-worker in the Church, to fill heaven with God's children.

"Priestly celibacy creates an emptiness to receive that other *wonderful gift* that only Jesus can offer and give – the gift of divine love. First of all, Jesus offers his precious gift of himself for a life-long, faithful and personal friendship with him, in tenderness and love. Nothing will make him give up his faithfulness. He remains faithful.

"By freely choosing priestly celibacy the priest renounces earthly fatherhood and gains a share in the Fatherhood of God. Instead of becoming father to one or more children on earth, he is now able to love everybody in Christ. Yes, Jesus calls his priest to carry his Father's tender love for each and every person. For this reason, people call him 'Father'."

THE PRIESTLY TITLE OF 'FATHER'.

Priests are often called "Father". Non-Catholics sometimes object to this, saying that

Jesus said, "Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven" (Mt 23:9). If this means the prohibition of a priest's being called "Father," then likewise no one could refer to his male parent as his father, nor quote the fourth Commandment, "Honour your father and your mother."

However, priests are rightly called "Father" since they possess spiritual fatherhood. In this sense St Paul wrote, "I became your father in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 4:15; cf. 2 Cor 6:13; 1 Thess 2:11; 1 Tim 1:2). The meaning of Christ's saying is that human fatherhood is as nothing before the Fatherhood of God. All priests, as indeed all fathers, are called to imitate the virtues of our Heavenly Father, among which are love, providence, care, tenderness, strength, fidelity, mercy and compassion.



WOMEN PRIESTS?

Some people have proposed the ordination of women as priests – but this is an impossibility. In 1994, in the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Pope John Paul II defined "that the Church has no faculty whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women, and that this judgement is to be held definitively by all the faithful." Many years before, the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* said, as the 1983 Code, in Canon 1024, says: "Only a baptised *man* receives sacred ordination *validly*."

The Church considers herself bound to the choice of men only for the priestly ministry, in line with the Lord Jesus' choice of men only for the college of Apostles. This was not just a preference in keeping with the culture of his times; quite the opposite, it was counter-cultural. The Jewish and Christian religions were unique in not having priestesses, unlike the various pagan religions of their time.

The Son of God became a man, and not a woman, to be an image of his heavenly Father, and he likewise chooses certain men to represent and continue his spiritual Fatherhood and Headship in the Church. So clear is the Church's teaching on this point

that as early as the fourth century St John Chrysostom wrote: "Divine law has excluded women from the ministry" (*De Sacerd.* III, 9).

MARY, MOTHER OF PRIESTS

We contemplate our Blessed Lady, the Mother of Jesus, standing at the foot of the cross of her Son, our only High Priest, with St John the beloved Apostle and priest close by her. Jesus said: "Woman, behold your son" and "Son, behold your mother" (Jn 19:26-27). God left the Virgin Mary behind for a time – to see the establishment of the Church, to strengthen the priesthood of the Apostles, to be a mother to them, until the Church, the young Church was formed. Just as Mary helped Jesus to grow, so she also helped the Church to grow in the beginning. She helps to form every priest. She has a very tender love and special protection for every priest.

THE YEAR OF THE PRIEST

Pope Benedict XVI has announced that the Church will celebrate a special year for priests from 19 June 2009, Feast of the Sacred Heart, to 19 June 2010. The year will commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of St John Vianney, the parish priest of Ars, France. Pope Pius XI proclaimed St John the patron of all parish priests, but during the course of the Year of the Priest Pope Benedict will proclaim him the patron saint of all the priests of the world.

Let us pray for our priests that they may be true sons of Mary, close brothers of Jesus Christ the High Priest, and inspiring images of the Fatherhood of God.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you attended an ordination of a new priest? What struck you about the ceremony?
2. How have priests you know reminded you of Christ the Good Shepherd?
3. What can the lay faithful do to help priests to fulfil their mission faithfully?
4. What can we do to help foster vocations to the priesthood?

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Photo: Kerry Myers, Catholic Weekly.

THE PRIESTHOOD

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Pope Benedict XVI has proclaimed a Year of the Priest, beginning on 19 June 2009. In this article Fr Peter Joseph explains the origin and meaning of the priesthood.



Every Catholic has seen priests at work – baptising, offering Mass, visiting the sick, conducting marriages or funerals, visiting schools, running parishes.

We cannot imagine a Church without priests. The priesthood certainly seems necessary to the Church – but where does it come from?

THE ORIGIN OF THE PRIESTHOOD

The Church of God has priests because Christ our Saviour is a priest – our High Priest – whose priesthood is shared by all the baptised, and in a special way by the ordained minister.

The Church has priests because Christ ordained certain men to be his priests. At the Last Supper, as the Council of Trent defined as a dogma of the faith, Jesus ordained the Apostles priests of the New Testament. He conferred priestly power on them when he said, after offering the first Eucharist, "Do this in commemoration of me" (Lk 22:19).

What Jesus gave his Apostles he wanted to endure till the end of the world. All priests in the Church have received their priesthood from bishops who have received it in an unbroken line from the Apostles themselves.

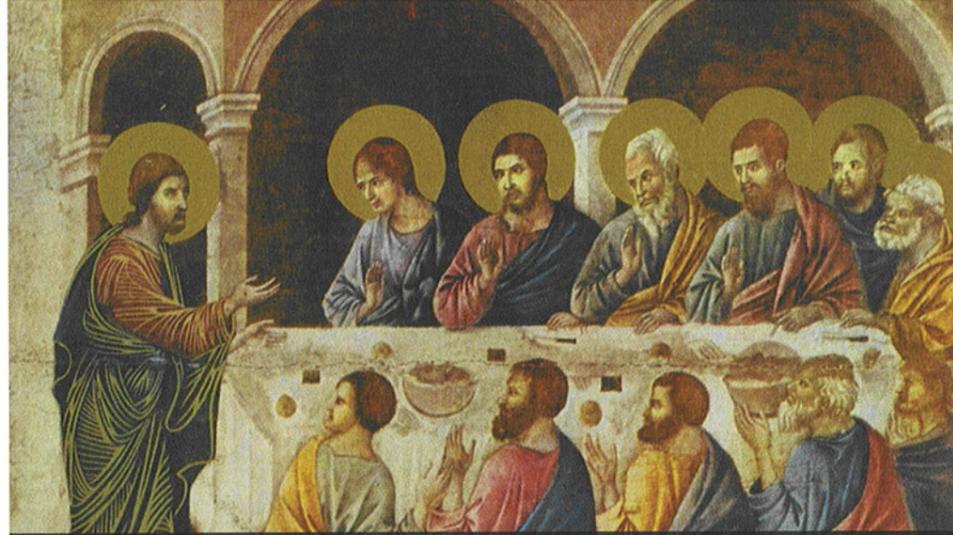
Since Christ is the one Saviour of the human race, priests do not *replace* Christ but *represent* him and prolong his ministry through space and time.

In order to continue his priesthood down the ages, Christ gave the Church the sacrament of Holy Orders, defined as "the sacrament that gives a man a share in the ministerial priesthood of Christ our High Priest." Jesus instituted this sacrament at the Last Supper. It is conferred by a bishop and is given in three degrees. From lowest to highest, they are: diaconate (possessed by a deacon), priesthood, and episcopate (the state of a bishop). We will focus on the second rank, that of priesthood.

ORDINATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

By a visible rite consisting of prayer and the laying on of hands, the Apostles ordained helpers and successors.

We read of the first deacons that "seven



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men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom", were chosen, and were "set before the Apostles" who "prayed and laid their hands upon them" (Acts 6:3-6). One of the seven was St Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Another was St Philip, who preached and baptised in Samaria.

When Sts Paul and Barnabas were about to set forth on their first mission, the heads of the Church at Antioch, "after fasting and praying ... laid their hands on them and sent them off." (Acts 13:3)

Through this rite of prayer and the laying on of hands, Paul and Barnabas received divine grace and were made the envoys of the Holy Spirit, i.e., they were empowered by him to preach and sanctify.

St Paul then passed on the same spiritual power to others in his turn. He says to St Timothy: "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Tim 1:6). As the context shows, St Paul is speaking of the grace to discharge the duties of a bishop. St John Chrysostom (d. 407) paraphrases the words thus: "Excite anew the grace you received for the purpose of ruling the Church." (*Hom. in 2 Tim., 1*)

We see in the New Testament that those who received this rite had authority to teach, sanctify and rule. They had to teach and preach (cf. 1 Tim 5:17; Tit 1:9), administer sacraments (cf. Acts 19:4-6; Jam 5:14-15; 1 Cor 1:16), care for the flock of Christ (cf. Acts 15:22; 20:28), give directives (cf. Acts 15:6 ff.; 1 Cor 5:3-4; 11:17,33-34), receive obedience from the faithful, watch over their souls, and render an account for them (cf. Heb 13:17; 1 Tim 3:1-6). The deacons instructed and gave Baptism (cf. Acts 8:26-38).

SACRED CHARACTER

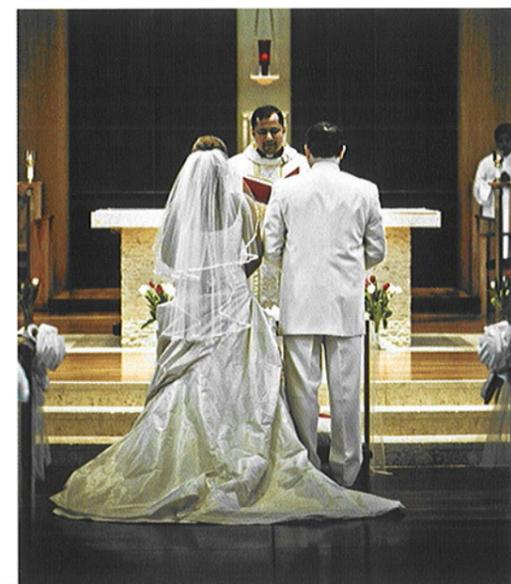
The priesthood of the New Testament is not just an office or appointment like being elected mayor or member of Parliament. It imprints a permanent and irremovable mark

upon the soul, a priestly "character," just as the Christian "character" is given permanently at Baptism. It is this sacred seal received through the sacrament of Holy Orders which distinguishes the Catholic priest from a Protestant minister or a lay evangelist. A minister holds an office deputed to him by his community, but the priest is empowered by Christ and commissioned by him via his bishop or religious Superior.

St Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395) says of a newly ordained priest, that "he who was but yesterday one of the people suddenly becomes ... the dispenser of hidden mysteries ... Though in outward appearance he is the same as before, by a certain unseen power and grace, he is transformed into a higher being." (*Orat. in Bapt. Christi*)

The distinctive character in the soul is the basis for the distinctive clerical dress required of the priest. His wearing of priestly dress is a proclamation of Christ, an outward sign of his consecration by and to Christ, and it makes him recognisable and available to God's people.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*



St John Vianney - Patron saint of all priests

teaches: "This sacrament configures the ordinand to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may be Christ's instrument for his Church. By ordination is received the capacity to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet and king." (CCC 1581). So, every priest, like Christ, has three roles: he is a minister of the sacraments, a teacher, and a leader.

MINISTER OF THE SACRAMENTS

Firstly, the ordained man is a *priest* – he blesses, offers and sanctifies. He is an icon of Christ, a living representative of the Redeemer whose work he continues. He gives *Baptism* to infants and adults. He can administer *Confirmation* to adults after baptising them and, with the faculty from a bishop, to children when needed. Above all, he has the power of offering the great Sacrifice of the *Mass*, administering *Holy Communion*, and forgiving sins in the sacrament of *Penance*. He also administers *Anointing of the Sick* and officiates at *Marriages*, giving couples the nuptial blessing. The only one of the seven sacraments that he cannot give is *Holy Orders*, which is reserved to a bishop.

A priest is essentially a mediator, a sharer in Christ's mediation. To God, he presents man's prayers, petitions, repentance and needs. From God, he brings Christ's truth, love, grace and mercy.

The priest presides over the worship and prayer of the faithful in church, in such acts as *Benediction* and *Vespers*. He also administers sacramentals and blessings, such as enrolment in a scapular, blessing of a home, or blessing of a woman before child-birth.

The Church encourages her priests to offer Mass daily. This is indeed the greatest office of the priest: to offer the Body and Blood of God the Son to our Heavenly Father in a perfect sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, propitiation and petition – for the Church and the world, for the living and the dead. The priest-celebrant speaks in the very person of Christ when he says the momentous words: "This is my body ... this is my blood." The priest offers himself along with the sacrifice; and the Church, too, is joined to the Eucharistic offering, in order to be handed over to God the Father Almighty, in, with and through Jesus Christ, the one Mediator.

The priest in the sacrament of *Penance* is a minister of reconciliation. He reconciles sinners with God and the Church. He brings to life the parable of the Prodigal Son, whose Father mercifully welcomed him back to the family and restored all that he had lost and rejected. Every priest, sooner or later, will hear the confession of a death-bed repentance and, in response to a tally of sins,

will have the joy of pronouncing the words of Divine Mercy: "I absolve you of your sins." St John Chrysostom, in his great work on the priesthood, says, "Priests have received a power which God has given neither to angels nor archangels." (*De Sacerd.* III, 5)

In order to preach and minister fruitfully and zealously, the priest must be a man of prayer. No priest can remain faithful or spiritual without prayer. At his diaconate, he promised to pray each day the Divine Office (the Breviary), for the Church and the world. This public prayer of the Church is a yearly liturgical cycle of prayers for each day, composed principally of Psalms, as well as intercessions and other readings of Sacred Scripture and ecclesiastical writers.

TEACHER OF THE WORD OF GOD

In addition to being a minister of the sacraments, the ordained man is a *prophet* – he teaches the Word of God. He announces a message which is not his own; he preaches a *revealed* message. He is not its author and interpreter. He is its transmitter. Does this mean that he is just a record playing or a mindless reader who reads things out without changing a word? Of course not; he takes the responsibility of explaining Christ's doctrine to the people so that they understand it. It is up to him to help people appreciate the Gospel more and know how to apply it to their lives. The priest must prepare and give his own homilies, talks and classes. He must know the teachings of the Church on matters of faith and morals and must be ready with an answer to the more common questions and difficulties. He preaches not himself but Christ crucified and risen.

SHEPHERD AND SERVANT OF THE COMMUNITY

Thirdly, the ordained man is a *leader* of the community – he shares in Christ's royal or *kingly* mission. Of course, Christ's kingship is like no other headship. Christ led by example, not just by command. He made himself last and servant to all; he got down on the ground to wash his disciples' feet, and he laid down his life for his sheep.

To say a priest is a servant does not mean he is devoid of authority. A priest takes the responsibility for the life of a parish or his apostolate in a way that cannot be delegated. He is, like Christ, the shepherd of the flock. His authority is not ordered to his personal benefit but to the building up of the whole Church. He must look out for all the sheep, not just those close to him or who like him on a personal level. Priests are available for all God's people and try to be concerned about all.

Some priests belong to a diocese, a territory governed by a bishop. These priests are called *diocesan* or *secular*. They can own property and are responsible for their own finances and possessions. Others are *religious* priests, who belong to a religious order and, having

taken a vow of poverty, do not own personal property. They are under the direction of a religious Superior.

As a guarantee that he is not in a self-appointed ministry or just 'doing his own thing,' a diocesan priest promises obedience to his bishop. A religious priest promises the same to his religious Superior. The diocesan priest first promises obedience and respect to his bishop at his ordination as a deacon. Obedience ensures that his ministry is at the service of Christ and the Church.

PRIESTLY CELIBACY

One of the requirements of the priesthood, at least in the Latin rite, is that the priest cannot be married. This is known as priestly celibacy.

Every recent Pope since John XXIII has said explicitly and emphatically that clerical celibacy is a jewel of the Church that will not be renounced. Our Lord, our High Priest, was not married, and he praised celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Mt 19:12). Do we need reminding in this *Year of St Paul* that the Apostle Paul was celibate and commended this state of life? (cf. 1 Cor 7:8)

Once a man is a priest, he can never marry *after* ordination. That is a law held and applied universally and without exception by East and West, Catholic and Orthodox. Eastern Catholic Churches, such as the Maronites, Melkites or Ukrainians, have married clergy (married, that is, *before* diaconate) but they have never had married bishops.

Catholics know the value of clerical celibacy. Anyone who has studied the history of the Church and her missionaries can see plain-as-day that priestly celibacy, lived joyfully and prayerfully, has been a source of spiritual fruitfulness for the Church. How has the Church spread to all nations of the most diverse cultures – but through celibate and dedicated priests and religious?

Celibate clergy have renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven and so can serve God with an undivided heart. They are not distracted from their work by family affections and cares, and are free to work wherever they are needed. Celibacy in the priest is a sign and stimulus of charity, and a singular source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world. The celibate priest is a sign of the mystical marriage between Christ and his Church and is better fitted for spiritual fatherhood in Christ. In short, celibacy is most fitting in him who, by ordination, is configured to Christ the Head and Spouse of the Church.

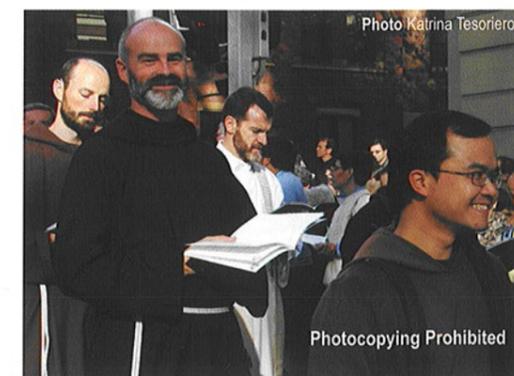


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