

CELIBACY AND RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

By JAMES CLIFTON

FROM THE clerical celibacy debate that has been going on now for some time, there has emerged a growing conviction that certain aspects of the subject must be separated for the purposes of discussion and eventual clarification. Thus, the disciplinary features of celibacy in the western churches have to be viewed apart from celibacy as an evangelical counsel and choice of life-style. But apart from the question of what should have been done or should be done in the future to produce theological expositions of a more cogent and credible sort, other aspects of the current situation call for notice. First of all, the theology of celibacy is highly inflated. Much has been written recently about christianity's traditional attitudes toward sexuality; and no doubt theology, still aware of impedimenta from the past, tends to be a little defensive. At the same time, the contemporary attitudes toward sex, marriage and family colour the presentation of the reasonableness and values of the single life. To any disinterested observer, however, it may appear that any mode of life in need of such elaborate explanation and defence may not be all that secure in the thinking of its defenders and practitioners.

Further, despite the best of intentions and efforts on the part of those who attempt to treat the subject objectively and seriously, a lingering suspicion exists that there is some reluctance and failure to deal with the really radical issues: sexuality, personal maturity, human relationships and involvement, and the risks involved in celibate living (as in all living). These, where they are treated at all, tend to be clothed in theological and ascetical terminology that elevates (and removes) them from a recognizable human situation. (Eugene Kennedy and others have attempted to discuss some of these elements of celibacy.¹ But for the most part they have been met with indifference, uninformed criticism or irrational defensiveness.)

Particularly significant is the assumption that celibacy is necessarily

¹ Cf *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Psychological Investigations* (Washington, D.C., 1972).

a less lively issue in religious communities, whether clerical or not, since celibacy is a freely chosen part of that life. Yet anyone familiar with the literature on religious chastity is aware that the case for it is no less over-stated than for clerical celibacy: and, at present, equally complicated and confused, because intertwined with such matters as vows, the essence of religious life, witness (eschatological or otherwise) and community.

It must be stated that there is really no need to justify the existence of celibacy. History and experience indicate that the single life has always been a genuinely human and christian choice. The behavioural sciences likewise attest that it is a realistic and normal option for individuals and groups of men and women. Though these sciences may not be as enthusiastic about the motives some religious (or others) have for making this choice, about the styles and paraphernalia developed by groups or individuals and the attitudes that have been developed especially toward the opposite sex, the fact remains that celibacy has no difficulty in justifying its place in human and religious society.

But the principal reason why religious chastity must be looked at seriously is its central importance to the total and genuine renewal recommended by the Council to all religious communities. For those who are taking renewal seriously, chastity can no more be ignored than can matters of poverty and obedience; in fact, it is a much more vital issue. And yet, for most religious communities, the topic has never headed the list of renewal subjects.

In the discussion that follows, I want to propose a model for renewal drawn from the experience of many communities: one which is built up in sequential stages — community living, spirituality (communal and personal) and apostolate. (But since all three are part of the life of individuals and the community, they cannot be considered in isolation; and there is a mutuality among all three.) These represent specific areas to which attention is given for some period of time and which are singled out for concerted action directed toward realistic goals. Nor is the sequence a random one: it shapes the kind and quality of the renewal that takes place. And though the process is feasible in the traditionally institutional, large communities, it is more suited to smaller groups.

At the level of community living, renewal begins with a commitment to the human values of life together — such as individual responsibility for one's own and others' growth, concern about the lives and actions of the members of the community, love, openness and confrontation. It is difficult to give names to these human elements, because they

have so many meanings for different people. For others, they have almost no meaning: they have been so bandied about in current literature and conversation that they have been emptied of their significance. The vocabulary, however, is of secondary importance. What is important are the experiential realities accepted as contributing towards a more human life. Some will doubtless assert that these are really spiritual values, and, as such, have been encouraged by traditional forms of spirituality, ascetical manuals and religious formation programmes. I do not believe that the equation is that simple or clear. What is true is that this 'spiritualizing' process in the ascetical tradition has often emptied this vocabulary of its human content. To cite but one relevant example, it would be interesting to determine what kind or how much of the human, in the thinking and response of religious men and women, remains in the word 'love'. Perhaps a great deal more than one would expect. But if so, this is *despite* the spiritualizing that has been part of their education and training and not *because* of it.

The renewal of community life involves, then, the effort to live together accepting and expressing all these values that comprise the genuinely human: in commitment, that is, to all the ideals of human life and society — ideals that can be at the same time evangelical, though not in the narrow sense of the counsels. Conversely, such renewal is an explicit, living denial of those values and forces that are inhuman or dehumanizing for individuals and society, some of which have found their way into the Church and religious communities. This stage of renewal has never been easy: it has demanded re-education, discovery and experimentation. It has meant the rejection of past life-styles in which many had made enormous investments. Because of this, intellectual re-evaluation has never been enough to sustain the process of renewal. Values, attitudes, the emotional life, are also part of the picture: and it is in these areas that the process has been most painful, as well as fruitful.

Where such renewal has begun and continues, those involved have come to a way of living which is its own reward, though not entirely so. As a sign of joy, love and genuine personal and mature relationships, this kind of community is needed by our contemporary alienated, frightened and impersonal societies. It is a symbol of hope and refreshment in the midst of the Church and world that surround it. But by the very commitment of its members, a community comes to recognize that more is required; the need to re-define and integrate the faith-dimension that must characterize religious life. And here begins the next stage of the renewal.

This second stage is not, of course, completely separate from the first. A religious group does not suspend its faith and acts of religion while it gets on with the work of humanizing itself. However, in terms of attentive and directed effort, the first stage is concerned with clearing away those things that, traditionally on their own admission, deform and obstruct the divine in the lives of christians. Areas for discussion re-opened at the second stage are such things as communal worship, private and community prayer, discernment of spirits, the gospel teachings and counsels.

Two phenomena are noticeable here. First, religious ideas and language are critically assessed. The human processes that have been at work cause the community to speak a more personal — though no less theological — language. Individual needs and wishes must be incorporated into the desires and goals of the group. But unlike the 'dialogues' that went on at another time, individuals now speak about their spiritual lives without embarrassment and apology. And while everyone may not be at the same level of growth, there is a willingness to speak about and to one another. There is an effort to speak honestly and simply about the spiritual in the life of the group, in order to determine what may be appropriate outward expressions of its corporate faith.

Secondly, for those who have engaged in this kind of discussion, it is rather surprising to find individuals and groups re-adopting many of the 'spiritual' values and practices of the past. But with significant differences also. Choices about worship, prayer, reflection, meditation and dialogue on the scriptures now arise from felt-needs and in an effort to make explicit the christian and religious character of the group. There is a recognition that Christ must have a significant place in the lives of all the members in a genuine and demonstrable way, arising from the conviction that this human growth demands, besides good will and communal effort, wisdom, sacramental signs and grace: a need that cannot be fulfilled by an arbitrary regimen of 'spiritual exercising', intended to take care of an obligation that arises from guilt feelings. This state is seen as a process that has to remain open and subject to re-evaluation.

The third stage has to do with the apostolic work of the members. In some cases it is a community endeavour, such as teaching in the same school; but more and more the pattern is that individuals engage in individually chosen areas of employment. In the initial stages of community renewal and in the very formation of the group, the choice of apostolate may be and usually is determined by the past preparation

and experience of individuals — each one continues to work at what he or she has been doing for years. Where some freedom of choice is present, a similar kind of employment as in the past is usually chosen, but now with some awareness of the economics of the choice. What kind of salary does the work bring into the community, what stability, security and benefits does the work provide? These are some of the considerations added to personal preference and aptitude. This economic dimension of apostolate cannot be minimized. If community renewal involves personal responsibility, economic accountability is a necessary ingredient.

To some, this concern about finances and job security might appear to be a movement away from religious ideals and practice. It has been said that religious should not have to be concerned about such mundane matters, in order that they may be free to do the work of God and the Church: such concerns militate against a 'spirit of poverty'. Accepted uncritically and practised unreflectively, these sentiments have retarded the maturity and co-responsibility of countless religious men and women. It must be stressed that genuine personal maturity and related areas of communal growth will be impossible until religious have real control over the economics of their lives. Hence the importance of the individual assuming responsibility for all his related choices and their consequences.

At the same time, a developing understanding of mission will acquire perspectives that go beyond economics and career choice. The atmosphere of the dialogue between the individual and the community is marked by the same attitudes operative in the previous two stages. If one were to describe the common denominator of our re-examination as high-lighted by mission, it might be simply phrased: what can I and we do that is significant? Significant in the community's life together, in the expression of its faith in Christ and relationship to him, and in the work of reconciling men to God and bringing about his kingdom. This has little to do *explicitly* with witness. If this renewal has any value as a witness to the societies around religious life, it will not be something contrived or produced, but will result rather from the authenticity and credibility of the people and life-styles that become evident to others.

These new perspectives on apostolate are concerned with a total evaluation of each member's work and a heightened consciousness of mankind's needs, which arise from a sensitivity and courage resulting from the whole process. The community, looking at its life and ministry realistically, becomes modest about its place in the larger society. It recognizes the limits of its relevance and influence. At the

same time, having come to a deeper awareness of its own values and commitment, it feels that it must and perhaps can begin to affect the lives of others.

There is also a certain ambivalence that makes this the most painful of all the stages. In the re-evaluation of a community's living together and the choice to live more humanly, one of the initial principles concerns the secondary character of work and activity. This is often a reaction to the 'work ethic' and the undue influence that it exerted over the lives of religious men and women at another time. The former style of living produced outstanding teachers, nurses, administrators, but at a price. Identity and self-worth came to be estimated almost entirely by the criteria of competence, efficiency and work-load. In the face of retirement, religious became morose, fearful, disenchanted. And the majority had neither the time nor the availability to form deeper relationships.

A community achieving a modicum of renewal may want nothing to do with that former style of apostolate. And yet, for the vast majority of religious communities, ministry is the *raison d'être*. So it is that the desire to share one's faith life with others (and to receive from them also) becomes another urgently felt need. To describe it simply, the difference now in ministry is quality rather than quantity. The crucial problem is, how much time and effort can be expended in serving others without suffering a diminution of the quality of human relations and shared faith experiences — all of which have demanded great effort and struggle to achieve? The tension between living and work is not a new one, nor one that confronts only religious. But because of the greater sensitivity and consciousness now present, the question is perhaps a genuine one for the first time in many religious lives. The anxiety, then, inherent in this last stage results from the need to evaluate all the values arrived at up to this point. One latent fear is that individuals, or the entire community, may have committed themselves to unrealistic ideals and goals. Of the utmost importance here is the honest and explicit statement of the questions and possible answers, along with all the probable implications of the courses of action that may be taken. The anxiety here is whether some will now leave to engage in ministries that individual needs and convictions demand. Or whether, if all stay together, the community will have to embark on a completely different style of living — and how often can this happen in a lifetime? Anyone who has been involved in the renewal process thus far described will recognize the deeply personal character of these last questions. And yet some convictions, fostered by the total process, now begin to become

more evident. It is clear (perhaps for the first time) that some questions facing a community can be answered 'only by prayer and fasting'. The need for guidance by the Spirit is acknowledged, and the decision genuinely to engage in discerning his will is made with humility and a recognition of one's inadequacies never before felt. There is a further conviction that any authentically human and christian renewal is fragile and always open. Vocation and community are not static. New calls and demands are integral to human and christian growth. The decision to live faith together with others must include the acceptance of the fact that God continues to be operative in the life of each individual as well as in that of the community. And he may not call all together at the same time. A community must live with this open-ended character of personal lives — a feature that it likewise must accept in its own corporate existence. A great deal of trust and faith are thus demanded — and a profound respect for individual lives. But such an attitude toward life recognizes the risk and uncertainty that must always be present. This is life, however, and this kind of life is worth living. Its opposite might be more comfortable and safe, but hardly more enriching and exciting.

What has this discussion to do with celibacy? Very simply — everything. For it is only within the total context of life, and more especially in the context of total religious renewal, that celibacy can be dealt with in a way that is more than academic and peripheral. This is not to say that convictions about celibacy and about the possibilities and limitations entailed in the choice have nothing to do with the process. But as with so many of the other matters connected with renewal, celibacy also demands to be treated in distinctly new ways with correspondingly possible new results. It is however, worth emphasizing that in the average debate on priestly or religious celibacy, the need for personal and communal re-evaluation of its connection with mission is hardly ever raised. The argument for celibacy which rests on the freedom to participate more intensely and unselfishly in the work of ministry is often the least significant and cogent aspect of the reappraisal.

When celibacy is viewed realistically, some facts become evident. First of all, for most religious, the choice of celibacy is rarely coincidental with vocational choice. Individuals are attracted to a community by the personalities of the members, the life-style of the group or the particular activities performed by the community. Celibacy is part of the picture, but generally as background. The explicit choice may come years after the decision to join a community. It usually happens that a person becomes aware of what really is demanded by celibacy only

after some time and for a variety of reasons; and at that point his whole vocation-choice may be re-examined, with the result that for the first time he makes an explicit and unequivocal decision to live the celibate life. Some, through a lack of freedom or courage, postpone the choice, producing thereby a certain ambivalence and conflict in their lives. Some perhaps never make the choice.

Further, a realistic appraisal from personal experience often indicates that the choice is not exactly 'reasoned' or capable of explanation. Through a complex of circumstances of personal and family history, individuals 'choose' to remain single. If they choose to do so in a religious community, the decision is rarely a harrowing event of their lives. It has little to do with a theology of eschatology, witness and kingdom. Most religious would have little hesitation in admitting that they chose the celibate style of life for reasons that were not all that clear and still may not be so. But like all important choices, it is not made once-for-all; it may have to be reaffirmed for new and different reasons. It may even have to be changed.

When the conscious choice is made with reflection and from experience, it is often accompanied by a theological rationale for this style of life. For most, this rationale is quite modest, one which recognizes the element of mystery involved, and the grace that has to be part of the resolve to continue in such a life. As a person becomes more comfortable with his decision, especially with the good things that are part of it, he gives little or no thought to comparisons with other styles of life, to marriage especially, nor is he particularly concerned about the questions and doubts of others. Celibacy, however, must undergo closer scrutiny in any authentic renewal, principally because such renewal has to be personal and open to reappraisal in terms of all the values involved.

One of the aspects of renewal that has not been mentioned so far, but comes into sharper focus when celibacy enters the discussion, is the possibility that the process may result in individuals *not* remaining part of the community, but actually deciding that this kind of religious living is no longer attractive and desirable. To some, this prospect is so threatening that it may explain their reluctance to enter into the process. At the level of human values, the individual who finds personal involvement and loving relationships impossible or difficult may be faced with uncomfortable questions about the personal character of his celibacy. Or the person who finds the community no longer capable of satisfying particular needs (realistic ones, hopefully) may decide to commit himself to another community or another person in marriage.

For the individual who has restricted his or her life to members of the same sex, in the renewed apostolic thrust that calls for wider acquaintances and involvement, one may discover needs and attractions that require new choices. Here, certain alternatives emerge from the renewal process, that may or may not have been considered or expressed at another time.

The choice to grow, expand individual visions and goals, and to interiorize human and christian values must be judged, it would seem, as a good that far outweighs the risk or the uncertain results that may take place. The alternatives, a secure and unchallenged life that never realizes the potential of individuals, or a quasi-moribund existence, may have its attraction for some. But one wonders if these are choices really open to christians. At least to a community involved in renewal, however, they will have no appeal at all. Yet such a community has to live with the possibility that its efforts may lead some members to move to other communities or to marriage or to celibate lives outside religious life involving pain and suffering for all.

To turn now to the principal elements emerging from the re-appraisal of celibacy. To begin with, it involves some acknowledgment and acceptance of one's own sexuality: and since one's sexuality touches the very fabric of one's life and identity, it must be dealt with honestly and forthrightly. Unless one has matured enough to deal with one's emotions, unique drives (ambition, self-acceptance, etc.) and the complementarity within one's own sexual identity (tenderness, the caring desires in a mature man, for example), then the process at the level of building the human dimension of community and in the activities of the ministry can be less effective and successful. To take one blunt example, a religious community must be able to say to itself that it lives together not because the members have homosexual tendencies. If any member has doubts or confusion about this, then his place in the group can vitiate what is going on. At the same time, a group must also be comfortable with the loving care and concern its members feel and express for one another, the gentleness or sensitivity of some and the attractions that some have for one another more than for others (particular friendships, that is, in a normal and christian sense). To put celibacy solely and exclusively in the context of relationships with the opposite sex overlooks the equally important question of personal sexuality and of the relationships with the members of one's community.

Celibacy certainly has to do with attitudes toward and associations with members of the other sex. Among the questions arising for a

religious community is what friendships and involvements, and what quality of these, are open to a community that no longer sees the opposite sex as the enemy. In fact, if a community feels the desire to expand the circle of its friends, to share its prayer and worship, and to intensify its ministry to others, it becomes clear that this desire cannot exclude one-half of the human race. A community may come to the conviction that it can enrich its entire life by contacts and friendships with the other sex (religious, single, married). At the same time, it admits that attractiveness, which does not die with an act of the will or of religion, is part of this conviction. Hence a more frequent and closer association with the other sex will be a normal consequence of the outward movement of the community.

The friendships considered here are not only or even those which religious have had with cooks, school secretaries or fellow-workers in ministry. These can be and may continue to be business-like. That choice is certainly possible and may be desirable. Just as others choose friends and close associates, why must religious be expected to be different? Love is never spread around evenly, just as it is impossible to treat all people the same way. The latter, in fact, is not even the human and christian thing to do. The same is true about the relationships under discussion. If a community of men is not suspicious about the relationships among and between its own members, why the hesitancy and suspicion about involvements of those same members with women? Is it because sexuality is invariably translated into sex and genital activity? Is a close, loving friendship between the sexes excluded by the very nature of celibacy, or is it not rather one of the clear possibilities and consequences of this religious commitment?

No one denies that these attractions and relationships are different from those within one's own community. The point to remember here is that the attitudes and biases of religious may be little different from those in society at large. We live in a society which has distorted this segment of human existence because of historical, familial and religious reasons. If these distorted values come to be imposed on religious thinking and action, it would not be the first and only instance in history in which the expectations and subtle pressures of the larger society have reduced the freedom of others. Nevertheless, the stereotype that pictures all friendships with the other sex ending in marriage may be just as unreal as the caricature of all such associations as platonic. Any reasonable man or woman living in religious community knows there are norms, safeguards, dangers which are so obvious that they need not be mentioned here. Otherwise one would have to admit that history and

personal experience have nothing to teach. But can one lay down specifics to guide each and every individual? I do not think so. To try to do so would be to overlook the uniqueness and the respect due to each individual. On the other hand, perhaps there are some specific guidelines that come once more from the renewal process itself.

If an individual has come to engage continually in dialogue within the community about what is happening in his or her life, prayer and work, why are relationships with others outside the community less a part of that continuing dialogue and discernment? What is more 'personal' or 'private' about these matters than about others? Are they not just as much a part of the life and concerns of the whole community? To some this may all sound too idealistic, but then is not the entire enterprise of renewal idealistic? At every level, there are risks and dangers, but some of these have been and continue to be dealt with reasonably well. There seems to be no reason *a priori* to presume that success is less likely with regard to tensions that may arise from a more open attitude toward others outside the community.

Renewal, therefore, brings celibacy into focus because it is so vital a part of human and christian life. The questions raised and the solutions chosen will obviously not be the same for each individual. But for a community engaged in improving the quality of the lives of its members, celibacy cannot be put in a corner or be considered off limits to reappraisal. And this especially because renewal for active religious communities of necessity entails a fresh look at the people around them. Further, renewal carries with it a thrust away from purely individualistic, intramural concerns toward other societies and communities outside itself. With these it hopes to share its faith-experiences and also to learn from them. How can one exclude from this thrust the possibility of new and close associations and relationships with members of the opposite sex? This question, however, has to be treated seriously and openly in the entire context of the life of the individual and the community. It seems reasonable to predict that the same risks, anxieties, questions and tentative answers will be present here that are present at all the levels of renewal. But at the same time, the same sources of strength, both human and divine, must also be presumed to be present. Viewed in this way, celibacy can become a more integral part of a religious life, and make its own distinctive contribution to a richer, christian expression of that life.

If inadequacy and confusion mark much of the theological treatment of clerical celibacy, the same is probably true of expositions of celibacy within religious life. But this is not to say that the entire theological

structure from the past must be rejected. In fact, if renewal is truly open, it may turn out that in the future (and perhaps provisionally for the present) some theological insights and presentations may be readopted and integrated into the lives of individuals and communities. On the other hand, new directions appear necessary and practicable in the area of theology. It would seem to be the task of theology to examine the real situation, to evaluate celibacy as it is being lived here and now. This should be the raw material of the theologizing process. Exaggerated and less credible theological expositions rob the entire christian community, and especially religious communities, of the service which theology is meant to provide for faith and life. In the meantime, a serious obligation rests with religious communities to engage in theological reflection on their lives and actions. This reflection should anticipate and accompany the life process; it should make that process no less dynamic, hopeful and courageous. In the final analysis, what it learns about celibate living may serve the rest of the christian community in a vital and a permanent way.