

**Tim Sullivan** Family Life Director

## Tradition of priestly celibacy should be revered, not challenged

For the last year and a half, as the sexual abuse scandals in the Church have unfolded, I haven't devoted any attention in my column to the misdeeds of a segment of the Catholic clergy. Now, however, I'd like to take a shot at saying a few things that I haven't seen expressed despite the massive amount of attention this subject has received.



Why has this issue sparked such intense coverage by the media? Why have people responded so strongly to sexual misbehavior by Catholic priests when other ministers have been guilty of the same conduct but received considerably less publicity than their Catholic counterparts?

There could be many reasons, but one that has been largely overlooked is that people around the world, whether Catholic or not, generally have higher expectations of Catholic priests than of any other category of people on the face of the earth. This has little to do with the personal, human qualities of the men that become priests.

It has to do, first of all, with the fact that the priest, as an ordained, celibate male, represents Jesus Christ in a special, unique way. Second, the priest represents the original priests, the apostles, and can trace his lineage as a priest all the way back to St. Peter.

Third, through 2,000 years of experience, the world has learned to trust that the Catholic priesthood, despite its frailties on the human side, has been sustained by God's

grace and, as a result, has proven on the whole to be distinctively reliable. So, when a visible number of Catholic priests betray the trust of the people, the whole world is rocked.

Some people have responded to the crisis in the Church by asserting that none of this would happen if the Catholic Church permitted its priests to marry. I'm not going to get into the reasons underlying the Church's insistence on celibacy for priests, reasons which are clearly supported by Scripture and by common sense, not to mention the long history I have already referred to.

What I will address is the idea expressed by many people that there's something psychologically and biologically unhealthy about a priest having to resist his sexual urges. The notion exists that, by virtue of the vow of celibacy, a priest is deprived and less free than a married man, that celibacy is an unreasonable and unnecessary burden. Implicit in this attitude is a belief that men are basically incapable of controlling themselves, so it is cruel to ask them to try.

As is made clear in Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, celibacy is a gift from God. Therefore, while the gift is accompanied by certain challenges, it is also accompanied by the grace to overcome those challenges. For the one who receives such a gift from God, it is a source of great joy and genuine freedom.

Who is more free, a man who has mastered his passions or the one who is dominated by his impulses? I suspect that

many oppose celibacy because the celibate priest is a reminder of a reality that we don't want to admit, which is that self-control is very possible, and not just for priests. God gives all men, married and single, the grace to master their sexual desires so that their sexuality may be expressed responsibly.

The real issue for our time is not why priests can't marry, but why married men, within the appropriate limits of their vocation, can't be more like priests. When you stop and think about it, there is an important and decisive difference between men and women. Unlike woman, man generates life through a distinct separation from himself. The seed goes out of him. His biological role, compared to the woman's, is very modest.

The most important aspect, then, of a man's fatherhood is not his biological contribution but his spiritual paternity. Abraham was chosen to be the father of all believers not because of his astounding fertility but because of his great faith. Then of course there's Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus. The celibate priest, then, can be very much a father in a way that is not entirely distinct from the fatherhood of a married man. We're all supposed to pass on the faith to others.

Catholic priests should be revered for their celibacy. For those of us who are married, maybe we would be better off reflecting on what we have in common with our priests than how different we are.