

Item #48 (Celibacy)

The question of celibacy for the Catholic priesthood has been much in the news in recent years and the present Item has no intention of offering any criticisms pro or con of positions already taken except to go on record as holding the view that historically celibacy for the Catholic cleric as something not optional has been a characteristic of the Catholic priesthood since the calling of the Apostles. What the present Item intends to do is to present a possibly new view of such celibacy. I say “possibly new view” because I do not consider myself as having studied the question of celibacy in any depth and the views given below may already have been expressed elsewhere.

The scriptural basis for such a view would seem to be the Gospel of John as viewed in a special perspective as has been presented in Item #1 on the present website. There I have expressed the view that the Gospel of John views Jesus primarily as divine, whereas the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) view Him primarily as human. Given this supposition it would seem to follow that the Gospel of John gives an insight into the Trinity. This insight is helpful for understanding the implications of John 14,6-11, where Jesus speaks of His role as the only one who makes access to the Father possible. Further on, at John 16,5-15, Jesus reveals His work in connection with the Spirit and repeats the centrality of the role of the Father. What is not mentioned explicitly is “love”, but that has already been the subject in John 3,31-36, where the love for the Father, Son and Spirit has been revealed by Jesus who is presented as “coming from above” (v. 31), that is, as divine.

Present discussion of celibacy is framed in the context of something negative: the transient deacon, priest, bishop should not have a wife. But this view, true as it is, would seem to be about something the priest is *not* allowed to do because of his relation to Jesus Christ. It would seem that this negative obligation must follow from a positive obligation. If the Holy Spirit is said to be “spirated” from the Father and the Son, an inference based on texts of Scripture that speak of the Spirit “coming forth” from the Father and the Son (John 14,16—the Father; John 16,7—the Son), then there must be a unified act of spiration that results in this Spirit. And this unified act must be an act of love (see John 3,31-36). Thus this role of the Son, Jesus Christ, toward the Father in the spiration of the Holy Spirit provides the positive love that should be the basis for clerical celibacy. In abstaining from the earthly love of marriage the cleric should be above all committed to the heavenly love for the Father in his role as one who has followed the Apostles and thus followed Jesus in a special way.

Looking on Jesus in His earthly life one can presume His love for His mother and for His foster father. But given the constant stress of the evangelists on the prayer of Jesus alone with His Father, one can begin to understand that the real love of the life of Jesus Christ was for His Father. And it is this participation in the depths of the Trinitarian life that should be the real love of every cleric. Thus the love of the cleric emerges as not just something negative, but above all as something positive. The negative is made possible by the positive. The internal life of the Trinity is something gifted to the cleric by Christ with the words “Do this in memory of me”. (12 February 2020)