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* Knights of Malta *

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Chancellor's Update

Importance of Celibate & Noncelibate

In the December Update we quoted Pope Benedict XVI in reference to psalm 23, that presents Pope Benedict XVI's ideas on celibacy and marriage. Here are his concluding thoughts on this topic. (*Inside the Vatican*, November 2017 page 29 – 30.)

Seewald: Is that a conjecture when you say that there is a connection between the crisis of celibacy and the crisis of marriage?

Cardinal Ratzinger: That seems quite apparent to me. In both cases the question of a definitive life decision is at the center of one's own personality: Am I already able, let's say at age twenty-five, to arrange my whole life? Is that something appropriate for man at all? Is it possible to see it through and in doing so to grow and mature in a living way – or must I not rather keep myself constantly open for new possibilities?

Basically, then, the question is posed thus: Does the possibility of a definitive choice belong in the central sphere of man's existence as an essential component? In deciding his form of life, can he commit himself to a definitive bond? I would say two things. He can do so only if he is really anchored in his faith. Second, only then does he also reach the full form of human love and human maturity. *Anything less than monogamous marriage is too little for man.*

Seewald: But if the figures about the breakdowns of celibacy are correct, then celibacy collapsed *de facto* a long time ago. To say it again: Is this question perhaps one day negotiable in the sense of a free choice?

Cardinal Ratzinger: The point is that, in any case, it has to be free. It's even necessary to confirm by an oath before ordination one's free consent and desire. In this sense, I always have a bad feeling when it's said afterward that it was a compulsory celibacy and that it was imposed on us. That goes against one's word given at the beginning. It's very important that in the education of priests we see to it that this oath is taken seriously. This is the first point.

The second is that where there is living faith, and in the measure in which a Church lives faith, the strength to do this is also given.

I think that giving up this condition basically improves nothing; rather, it glosses over a crisis of faith. Naturally, it is a tragedy for a Church when many lead a more or less double life.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that has happened. In the late Middle Ages, we had a similar situation, which was also one of the factors that caused the Reformation. That is a tragic event indeed that calls for reflection, also for the sake of the people, who also really suffer deeply. But I think that, according to the findings of the last synod of bishops (*In 1994, on the consecrated life and its role in the world*), it is the conviction of the great majority of bishops that the real question is the crisis of faith and that we won't get better and more priests by this "uncoupling" but will only gloss over a crisis of faith and falsely obtain solutions in a superficial way.

Seewald: Back to my question: Do you think that perhaps one day priests will be able to decide freely between celibate and noncelibate life?

Cardinal Ratzinger: I understood your question. I simply had to make it clear that in any event, at least according to what every priest says before his ordination, celibacy is not a matter of compulsion. Someone is accepted as a priest only when he does it of his own accord. And that is now the question, of course: How deeply do priesthood and celibacy belong together? And is not the wish to have only one [without the other] a lower view of the priesthood? Nor do I think that in this matter it's enough simply to point to the Orthodox Churches and Protestant Christianity. Protestant Christianity has *per se* a completely different understanding of office: it is a function, it is a ministry coming out of the community, **but it is not a sacrament in the same sense; it is not priesthood in this proper sense....**

Seewald: Must not celibacy be dropped for the simple reason that otherwise the Church won't get any more priests?

Cardinal Ratzinger: I don't think that the argument is really sound. The question of priestly vocations has many aspects. It has, first of all, to do with the number of children. If today the average number of children is 1.5, the question of possible priests takes on a very different form from what it was in ages when families were considerably larger. And there are also very different expectations in families. Today we are experiencing that the main obstacles to the priesthood often come from parents. They have very different expectations for their children. That is the first point. The second point is that the number of active Christians is much smaller, which means, of course, that the selection pool has become much smaller. Looked at relative to the number of children and the number of those who are believing churchgoers, the number of priestly vocations has probably not decreased at all. In this sense, one has to take the proportion into account. The first question, then, is: Are there believers? And only then comes the second question: Are priests coming from them?

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