

STATEMENT ON

# CLERICAL CELIBACY

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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November 16, 1967

It is with deep satisfaction that we the Bishops of the United States gathered in conference to study and to appraise the needs and achievements of the Church in our country note with sincere gratitude the many efforts of the people of God to renew themselves in order to further the mission of Christ. We see this as a response in the Holy Spirit to the challenge of a message of the Council. We view this, too, as the whole Church ever-young and ever-old humbly admitting its shortcomings and striving for that holiness which is a mark of the beloved bride of Christ.

We note with regret some areas in which the response seems uneven; as such it is construed by many as a reserve toward or lack of confidence in those whom Christ has constituted to be teachers and shepherds of His flock. Specifically we are concerned about the attitude which manifests itself in some of our beloved priests, seminarians and others of God's people in regard to the traditional discipline of priestly celibacy.

The Council teaching on this particular discipline in the Western Church is clear and unmistakable. The *Decree on Priestly Formation* directs that candidates for the priesthood should be carefully prepared to appreciate and to embrace freely, willingly and without reservation the state of clerical celibacy. With full understanding of the holiness of marriage, they are called by the Church to dedicate themselves to the Lord with an undivided love and bear witness to the state which the resurrection will bring about in the world to come. (Luke, 29, 36; *Decree on Priestly Formation*, #10)

The *Decree on the Ministry and Life of a Priest* (#16) also approves and confirms celibacy for those who have responded to the call of Christ to share in a special way his priesthood.

At our meeting last April, we urged: ". . . that seminary formation programs be so deepened that the present generation of young men may be attracted to the positive idealism and the freely embraced discipline to which Vatican II recommitted the Church." This was a reaffirmation of our statement expressed together with the bishops of the world at the Council.

In June of this year the Holy Father fulfilling his promise to the Council expressed himself in the Encyclical "On Priestly Celibacy." With full and sympathetic consideration of the objections voiced against celibacy and with a clear understanding of the arguments advanced for making it optional, he solemnly reaffirmed the practice of the Western Church. He spoke as one aware not only of the freedom of all men, but also of the freedom of the Church to ordain only those genuinely disposed to accept her full discipline.

United as we are with the successor of St. Peter in the common responsibility of teaching and serving, we proclaim with a single voice the same teaching and enjoy the same discipline without reservation. Confirmed by our Christian experience as lived in our own country and conscious of human frailty in all its dimensions, we are firmly convinced that priestly celibacy grounded in Christ's invitation has been and will be a source of great advantage to the Church particularly in the United States.

ACJ 3-25



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It would, consequently, be irresponsible on our part to hold out any hope that this discipline will be changed. Such expectation is without foundation. We say this to our brother priests with full consciousness of the burden we carry. We know the loneliness that at times accompanies the life of the priest. We know, too, that Christ shared this human condition but was able to say: "I am not alone but the Father is with me." (John 13, 1) Our priestly vocation enables us to reach out to everyone as Christ did with an all-embracing love.

It is clear that an encyclical is not necessarily infallible teaching. It is, however, an exercise of the responsibility of the Holy Father to teach, guide and unify the Church. As such it calls for religious assent. With sorrow we say that some voices we hear today can hardly be described as expressing respectful acceptance. Let those who speak in such manner realize that they give the impression of not only challenging established discipline but of rejecting values that touch our Catholic beliefs to the scandal of the faithful and with notable detriment to vocations.

It is true that the Pope asks for further study and meditation on celibacy but not as a step to a "relaxation of existing law" nor "as a prelude to its abolition." His plea is directed to a deeper understanding of what it means to be associated in the priesthood of Christ and share His exclusive dedication to His mission of salvation. We repeat that plea without exception among us and without qualification. Our Holy Father explicitly said: "It would be much better to promote serious studies in defense of the spiritual meaning and the moral value of virginity and celibacy."

His appeal for study in no way weakens his solemn words: "Hence we consider that the present law of celibacy should today continue to be firmly linked to the ecclesiastical ministry (No. 14)."