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If celibacy is such a jewel why won't the pope let us look at it?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jun. 24, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

Determined to put down any threat to his already tottering autocracy, Tsar Nicholas allowed his troops to shoot into the crowds who were gathering before his palace seeking to tell him of his people?s widespread grievances. Is this the precedent for deploying Vatican sharpshooters on the roof of St. Peter?s to pick off anybody, from low level Catholics to high ranking Cardinals, who tells the Pope that celibacy may not be the ?brilliant jewel? he thinks it is.

Bullets began chipping the marble close to Austria?s Cardinal Schonbrun after he said that a frank discussion of celibacy was a necessary part of the response to the sex abuse scandal. Roman journalist Sando Magister used buckshot to describe Schonbrun as the head of an ?off-kilter? Church who by such a statement about celibacy is just reacting to ?the pressure of public opinion.? Magister?s shot, cheap by any measure, signals the curial worker bees to swarm through the Vatican hive to buzz supportive remarks, also cheap by any measure, supporting celibacy as, well, a brilliant jewel, just like the Pope says.

The Pope topped off the Year of the Priest by telling 10,000 good priests at the Vatican (the papal equivalent of what the first Mayor Daley of Chicago called a ?ruly crowd? at City Council meetings) that celibacy is, well, a jewel and it is not going to be pried out of its setting. It would be ?a scandal,? he said, only in ?a world where God is not there.?

If that?s clear to everybody -- or to anybody -- we still wonder why celibacy that was not brought down from the mountain by Moses or preached by Jesus, is defended as if it really were the crown jewel of Christendom?

James Carroll recently offered a brilliant analysis of celibacy?s relationship to the power driven clerical culture. Vatican sharpshooters are not defending celibacy but the clerical culture that could not exist without it. Clerical culture is high class male bonding that is often referred to as a celebration of fraternity. There is truth in that, of course, but clerical culture has more than an incidental similarity to a college fraternity that promotes good times, secrecy, exclusivity and privileges not granted to others. More importantly it promotes the fulfillment of ambition and an endowment with power. Men who make Skull and Bones at Yale often end up running the country. Men who embrace Roman clerical culture often end up running the Church.

There was a period in which clerical culture was a fun-filled place for healthy priests who were given enormous support by it and by the larger Catholic culture in which it was set. That culture enabled men to accept celibacy because its tone was set by the healthy priests who belonged to it. That culture shifted after Vatican II, as did the host Catholic culture around it. Even then, as studies of the priesthood done for the American bishops 40 years ago showed, most priests adjusted to celibacy rather than found it fulfilling in itself. They were like bachelors or favorite uncles, as they described themselves, who needed the extra boost that privileges that celibacy earned for them.

Celibacy is vigorously defended because any questioning of it is a threat to the power center clerical culture that controls the Church at this time. Modify celibacy and this culture would collapse quickly. Allow women priests and the same culture would be under a siege that it knows that it cannot withstand.

If celibacy is so self-evidently wonderful, we may ask, why are Church officials, from the Pope down, so defensive about it? If it is such a brilliant jewel, why won?t they let us take a closer look at it? If it is filled with light, why do they keep it in the dark? Didn?t Jesus warn us to be careful of those who prefer the darkness to the light?

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