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Jesuit?s book offers rich insights on celibacy

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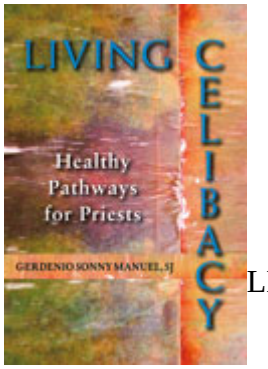

LIVING CELIBACY: HEALTHY PATHWAYS FOR PRIESTS
By Gerdenio Sonny Manuel, SJ
Published by Paulist Press, $14.95

The election of Pope Francis is not likely to reopen the issue of clerical celibacy and its importance to the health of the church and our bishops and priests. The celibacy requirement in the Roman church will be reaffirmed, but with a fresh emphasis on how to make it work better.

Jesuit Fr. Gerdenio ?Sonny? Manuel has written an important book for current and next-generation priests facing the challenges of ministerial effectiveness and personal well-being as celibates. His book is a clear sign of how far we have come from the days when newly ordained priests chose for their ordination cards the famous 19th-century prayer of French priest and orator Jean-Baptiste Henri Lacordaire that spoke of priests as otherworldly and heroic men with ?a heart of bronze.?

A licensed psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of San Francisco, Manuel?s formula for successfully ?living celibacy? is to embrace rather than escape the psychosexual dimensions of a life that forgoes genital sex and an exclusive intimate partnership for the sake of service to the church. He affirms the obvious: that the sacrifices entailed also bring multiple benefits, not the least of which is the freedom to cultivate a wide circle of professional and personal relationships and to travel light, serving whenever and wherever needed without the obligations of marriage and family.

This is not to say that living celibacy is easy, especially as a priest goes through midlife, when the uncertainties of aging and the crisis of realizing one?s limits hit the panic button.

Manuel proposes a lifelong approach to living celibacy in the form of five ?healthy pathways for priests.? They are:

- Live close to God and one?s deepest desires;
- Develop relationships and communities of support;
- Ask for love, nurture others, and negotiate separation;

- Cope with stress and recognize destructive patterns of behavior;
- Celebrate the holy.

Behind each of these summary prescriptions are rich stores of clinical data, analysis and case studies from the social sciences, joined to the deep perspectives of Catholic theology and spirituality. *Living Celibacy* is both informative and inspiring, making it a valuable tool for screening candidates, for those in formation programs and for newly ordained priests. Veteran priests can benefit from the basic principles the author presents. Each chapter ends with reflection questions for personal or group use.

Manuel affirms what Dominican Fr. Don Goergen risked censure to say in his now classic 1975 book *The Sexual Celibate* -- that ?friendship is not detrimental but central to celibate living, that celibate persons are also sexual persons, and that celibate life is a profound and rewarding way of living,? as Goergen wrote. Moving beyond a time when ?particular friendships? were forbidden and contact between priests and women was discouraged, Manuel assumes that today?s priests can live chastely and effectively in the real world when grounded in community and in the charism given to them to build up the church.

Priests who use their extraordinary freedom to serve others wholeheartedly will bear witness to the mystery of Christ?s love for his church. Priests who seem preoccupied with their own special needs or automatic status will fail to impress anyone, least of all married people in the thick of life?s demands and sacrifices. As one married woman said to this reviewer in a recent conversation, ?The biggest challenge for priests is not celibacy but selfishness.? Too much emphasis on the mystique of celibacy can produce a sense of entitlement that is only likely to extend the cycles of repression and compulsion that have so damaged the reputation of the priesthood for all priests.

Some readers may expect to find more discussion of questions about the value of clerical celibacy, the problems associated with clerical culture, issues regarding celibacy and homosexuality or theories that link sexual immaturity to child abuse. Manuel acknowledges these issues but brackets them from the primary focus of the book, which is to support those who choose priestly celibacy.

Manuel begins his book with a question posed by many people to celibates: ?How in the world could you do that to yourself?? He ends by affirming the privilege priests have of nurturing the ?close irrepressible connection between God and God?s people? that they share and witness to in their own desire and longing for God.

Living Celibacy reminds us all, married, single or celibate, that true love perfects human sexuality when it is lived passionately and chastely for the sake of others in any lifestyle or vocation.

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