



PRIESTLY CELIBACY - IT'S CALLED, GRACE

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Boulevard Voltaire is a site whose political courage, including in the defense of Christianity, can only be praised. But the rather [mediocre article](#) by Arthur Herlin, on the book co-authored by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, reflects an error of thought which leads to an inane conclusion: celibacy is not a dogma.

Obviously, since this is a question about the organization of the Church and not of the content of faith. It is therefore necessary to do a bit of history, and in particular the history of the Gauls, if one wants to understand the question and stop uttering nonsense.

In the fourth century, the Church of France was Gallo-Roman; that is to say that its liturgical language was Latin. But the men who constituted it were also acculturated "Gauls." Somewhat like Augustine was an acculturated "Punic" who spoke Latin, thought in Latin and prayed in Latin. They were part of the Greco-Latin culture which had been imposed when Gaul was subdued and had entered the *orbis romanum*. After the great persecutions, of which the frightful martyrdom of the group of Christians of Lyon (with the star of Saint Blandine at their center) was left as a memory in a letter well-known to the historians of ancient Christianity, and which attests to its antiquity, the Church of Gaul could finally organize itself, build monasteries, delimit dioceses and develop freely. From this fifth century, which was an apogee and an interval between the barbarian incursions and the conversion of a conquering Frankish king, we have a rich historiography that only the post-modern inculture of our devastated parishes has plunged into oblivion. It is enough to open and read, without omitting the footnotes, *La Gaule chrétienne à l'époque romaine* by E. Griffe to become aware of it. For those who doubt.

At the very top of the virtues that the Church demands of its priests is continence. When the new priest came from the world, it often happened that he was married. In this case, the same rule applied to him as to the bishop – he would have to renounce the custom of marriage and live with his wife as with a sister. The bishop's wife was even called *episcopa*; the priest's wife was called *presbytera*. These women played a major role, relieving their husbands of worldly tasks: "they render to Caesar what is Caesar's, so that through their husbands they may give to God what is God's." And these tasks were not only cleaning the churches (which their maids did) or feeding the guests. They were concerned with the management of temporal matters in the broadest sense.

Such questions cause much debate from the very origins of the diocesan churches. By the fifth century, these imperative constraints had aroused criticism. In the region of Toulouse, a priest named Vigilance (sic) had criticized the continence imposed on priests. St. Jerome's *De septem ordinibus Ecclesiae* and

Contra Vigilantium attest that the discipline (not the dogma) of celibacy did not take hold among the clergy without reluctance. The authority of the Apostolic See, but above all the favor enjoyed by the monastic ideal among the faithful, contributed to the acceptance of this discipline. This monastic ideal was imposed during these centuries of unhindered development, supported in particular by a monk from the East (from Antioch), John Cassian, who brought the knowledge of the conventual organization of the monasteries of Egypt and contributed to its adoption, while the rule of Benedict of Nursia had yet to be formulated.

Abstinence is the visible face of a spiritual state called "chastity," a term that our sexuality-crazed world (heterosexual as well as homosexual and soon transsexual) can hardly apprehend anymore and which it sees as an unattainable and destructive ideal of humanity. But this only reflects the state of decay of our post-modern world and in particular the deep contempt that our society feels for the human body, reduced to being only an object of enjoyment. Including, supreme indignity, not to say infamy, the body of children.

Things reveal their secrets with difficulty, and the sexual mystery less so than any other.

We all know, if we have read a little, or loved, that there can be no human love which does not normally include, at least in desire, carnal union. By renouncing it, even in desire, the religious who takes a vow of chastity sacrifices two things. He sacrifices what Augustine calls the flesh, and what constitutes one of its deepest instincts, the properly carnal instinct. But this is only the visible, always somewhat spectacular aspect of the religious state.

Whether he is aware of it or not - and it is better if he is aware of it - the priest or the monk makes a sacrifice which reaches the abyss of man's natural aspirations. He sacrifices all possibility for him to desire and thus to reach that earthly paradise of nature whose dream haunts the unconscious of our human race and which Jacques Maritain has very nicely and justly described as the mad love between man and woman, that glory and heaven of here below, where a dream from the depths of the ages, consubstantial with human nature, becomes reality, and of which all the hymns sung down the centuries of yore have revealed the nostalgia inherent in poor humanity.

I will add to the list of hymns: the romances on M6 TV, the dramas of passion of the septième art, starting with the adaptations of Tristan and Yseult (although the potion that we made them drink partially absolves them). But this potion can also be understood as the metaphor of a power against

which we can do nothing, this madness called amorous passion that can alienate all reason. Human madness which we value in great literary works, but especially in many tragedies. It is of such a renunciation that the vow of chastity is above all the sign. The priesthood, it is sacrificed masculinity.

The priesthood is not alone in being called to this discipline: marriage sanctifies this powerful carnal instinct. There is a marital chastity whose purpose is not primarily the regulation of births. By submitting to a partial continence, which is called a discipline and which is a specific form of the virtue of temperance - man confronts an instinct which is that of his species, an instinct that dwells in his person as a foreign dominator and that holds it and torments it with a tyrannical violence. All literature testifies to this, and Zola as well as Balzac have perceived and shown it with consummate art - a furious force, immensely older than the individual, through whom it passes, and that chastity defeats. I examined many years ago, during a strange colloquium on the Chaste and the Obscene, how Zola shows, in *La Curée*, the slow path from lechery to obscenity. Our world, which pretends not to hide anything anymore, is an obscene world.

Solely in natural order, chastity is a release and therefore a liberation.

In the spiritual order, it is a mystery, that is to say a super-intelligibility which requires, in order to be adequately understood and interpreted, a little bit of intelligence, reflection and, incidentally, culture.

In the 5th century, these renunciates, called, sancti, priests or laymen, contributed greatly to the evangelization of a Gaul that was largely Christian in number and in its network, but not necessarily yet deeply Christianized.

May (Heaven permit) the aspiration to spiritual chastity, of which continence is only the visible part, return to our Churches. If it is not the whole of holiness, if it does not guarantee purity of heart, it contributes admirably to it.

The priest does not come to the priesthood with a rope around his neck, forced and coerced - he responds to a call in the depths of his being and his flesh as a man.

Why should we doubt that this call will not profoundly transform his very flesh, and give his whole person the strength to assume this renunciation throughout his life? This has a name - sanctification.

The man called to the priesthood receives a sacrament, a sign that works what it means. He receives it in the Name of Jesus, who said it himself – my yoke is light.

The brutal forces of the world which surround us, the degraded and degrading vision of human sexuality – everything contributes to make us forget, even to make us reject the basic fact of Christianity: an infinitely superior energy, a divine energy called Grace, communicated by the sacrifice of Jesus, eternally commemorated at each service.

It is because human energies (renewable, but with a lot of entropy) are transformed by this divine energy that the Grace of Baptism requires to be supported by the other sacraments. This is the only interest of ecclesiastical, monastic or other discipline – to allow the Christian to convert in himself this divine force which transforms him, in the God who nourishes him and on whom he nourishes; and this in a world that does not shine by its goodness, nor by its intelligence, let alone its justice.

Continence is a visible state that reveals an invisible state – that of chastity. The Virgin Mary is the most accomplished figure of it, and this is the reason why the priesthood nourishes a devotion to her. More discreet, even more silent, is the other great figure of this chaste humility which is given to us to contemplate in order to accomplish it in ourselves, according to what we are – the figure of Saint Joseph.

Marion Duvauchel is a historian of religions and holds a PhD in philosophy. She [has published widely](#), and has taught in various places, including France, Morocco, Qatar, and Cambodia.

The [featured image](#) shows, "Christ Blessing," by Fernando Gallego; painted ca. 1494-1496.

