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STATEMENT ON CELIBACY

November 14, 1969

NATIONAL CONFERENCE
OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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1. Moved by love for the Son of God Who "delivered himself up for us (Eph. 5: 2)" we wish to share with the entire People of God the appreciation and esteem we have for consecrated celibacy. At the same time we desire to thank God publicly for this gift, with which He has endowed the Church to make her a better servant of the human family. We thank Him for the abundant graces by which He enables the vast majority of our fellow-priests to continue generously in their celibate devotion to Christ, High Priest and Victim.

2. Yet, we are well aware of the developments of recent years and months which have led to confusion regarding celibacy in the Church of today. More and more priests have been withdrawing from the ministry and marrying, some without dispensation from their lawful obligations. Small groups have affirmed that they consider themselves free to exercise their priestly ministry even after marriage. Opinion polls are publicized to indicate that significant numbers of American priests and lay people favor "optional celibacy." All these developments receive such sensational coverage in the news media that a calm and objective handling of these problems has become difficult.

In our dedication to the common good of the Church, we see two problems of especially grave pastoral concern. The first is the deep anguish of those priests who—in varying circumstances—find themselves in a personal crisis over their commitment to celibacy and continuation of their ministry in the Church. The second is the bewilderment of large numbers of the Catholic clergy and laity, who

are saddened and confused when they hear that priests, some of them personal acquaintances, have left the ministry and married. At the same time it appears that a growing number of both clergy and laity, especially among the young, are not convinced of the value of the present discipline. These troubling developments require of us both pastoral teaching and action.

3. In the present statement it is not our intention to foreclose free and responsible discussion of these issues which seriously concern all Catholics. We believe, however, that much of the current discussion is not sufficiently illumined by the Christian faith seen in its historical development in the Church. And too often discussion centers on the personal problems of the clergy, rather than on the general good of the Christian community in its mission to the world. Because of our concern for the personal problems of the clergy, we have established the Commission for the Study of Priestly Life and Ministry. Yet the issues are much wider than these problems, and they are exceedingly complex.

An example of the oversimplification of the question in recent discussions is the slogan, "optional celibacy." The issues as to whether the Church should require commitment to celibacy as a condition of priestly ordination, whether she should in some cases permit the ordination of men already married, and whether she should permit a celibate priest to marry and yet continue to exercise his ministry—these are distinct issues.

4. In the Western Church the link between the priesthood and celibacy is not the result merely of theological reasoning, nor of law, but of the life experience of the Church. The decision to require unmarried candidates for the priesthood to commit themselves to celibacy as a condition for ordination emerged only after a long struggle, and only as the Christian consciousness discerned between priesthood and celibacy a certain affinity of major import for the life of the Church. This decision has survived several severe crises and has been reaffirmed with the general support of the faithful. This same sense of discerning Christian faith and love, rather than theoretical arguments alone, will continue to guide the Church in her current pondering of these issues and in her efforts to apply her discipline to contemporary needs. Our own intention in the present statement is to reaffirm our commitment to this discipline, to explain something of its value for our own times, and to put the question of celibacy in the broader context of the mission of the Church.

I. Positive Values of Celibacy

5. As bishops, our function is to bear witness to the Christian tradition of celibacy rather than to construct a theological defense of it. We must nevertheless, as part of this witness, call attention to several theological principles. In this exposition we presuppose and reaffirm the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, of Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *On Priestly Celibacy*, and our own earlier statement of November, 1967.

It is essential that our reflection on priestly celibacy not be isolated from the mystery of Christ and the Church and the needs of mankind. The theological and pastoral principle which should guide this reflection is the truth that the priest exists for the Church, and the Church exists for the world. "The Church is for the world," that is, for mankind in its struggle for a better future. The conciliar documents, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, together with such encyclicals as *Pacem in Terris* and *Populorum Progressio*, have clearly indicated the way in which this is true. The mission of the Church, like the mission of Christ himself, is a mission on behalf of man. It aims to serve the human person, his dignity, his freedom, his fulfillment. And it is a mission on behalf of the community of mankind. It seeks peace and reconciliation among men everywhere. To affirm and rejoice in this mission is far from triumphalism. Christians acknowledge with sorrow that within the Church herself, a Church of sinners, there are factors which threaten personhood and hinder community. In this regard the Church is willing to learn from the world, especially from the great secular movements and dedicated personalities of our times. However, the Church must, in fidelity to Christ, look upon herself as the bearer in history of the paschal mystery, that key to human destiny bestowed on mankind as a gift of the Father through Christ Jesus in his Spirit. As sign and instrument of the reconciliation of men with God and of men among themselves, the Church has an inescapable destiny to exist not for herself but for men. She proclaims the Kingdom of God, that is, the community of mankind redeemed and united in Christ. She does this primarily by being the community of faith, life, and worship which her founder prayed she might be. Her various institutions, structures and processes have validity precisely to the degree to which they enable her to be this saving community.

6. If the Church is for the world, "the priest is for the Church." The work of building that Church as the community of persons united

in Christ is the task of all her members. Still, Christ has provided his Church with the special ministry of leadership, to be exercised in preaching the word, celebrating the mysteries, and forming the Christian community. Since bishops are the primary leaders of the Church in this task, priests are called as brothers and helpers of the bishops to share in this role of leadership. This is their ministry, their service, their witness; and it is always with reference to this distinctive service of priests to the Church and to mankind that the question of celibacy must be considered.

7. It is important, moreover, that the present crisis in priestly life and ministry be situated in a broader context. It is not only priests who are in crisis today. The revolutionary character of our times is placing grave strain on traditional values and institutions and bringing anguish to those charged with responsibility for them. The crisis of self-identity afflicts others besides priests. Educators, scientists, civil leaders, are increasingly confronted with the same kind of searching questions as to how they are to conceive and fulfill their role in a constantly changing world.

Nor is it only the celibate vocation which is under grave pressure today. The vocation to marriage is in at least as serious a crisis. The percentage of marriages which end up in separation or divorce is far higher than the percentage of priests or Religious who do not persevere in their celibate call. Celibacy is ordinarily viewed in relation to marriage, and there is a striking parallelism in the changes affecting both forms of life today. In both, there is a shifting from an institutional emphasis towards a personal one. While marriage is still esteemed for its role of continuing the race of man and his traditions, the partners in marriage are more and more regarded from the viewpoint of personal dignity and fulfillment. The celibate vocation likewise is passing from a largely institutional to a more personal emphasis. Its validity for the priest is increasingly seen in the degree to which it enables him to realize himself as a man.

8. But if the priest today shares a crisis situation with others of his fellow men, there are nevertheless certain features proper to his situation, and these must be dealt with. Both the attractiveness and the tensions of the priestly vocation are related to the total availability which people look for in priests. In a special way the priest is the man fully and sacrificially identified with the kingdom of God. He has accepted priestly ordination in order to proclaim that kingdom, to celebrate it in the midst of the People of God, and to guide his

fellow Christians in their individual and corporate pilgrimage toward its consummation. This role of furthering the kingdom, however, does not remove the priest from the secular concerns of his fellow men. On the contrary, it is precisely in the name of the kingdom that he is called to be totally available for the work of building the community of mankind on earth today.

9. The eschatological kingdom is not to be conceived as something entirely of the future. While the kingdom of God proclaimed and inaugurated by Jesus is not fully identical with the Church, the Church is, nonetheless, "the initial budding forth of that kingdom" (*Lumen Gentium* n. 5). And while a certain distinction of Church and world, sacred and secular, is inherent in the Gospel, it remains true that the kingdom of God is present not only in the Church, but in some way wherever men come together in a union of mind and heart to promote on earth the values of truth, justice, freedom, love and peace.

10. The priesthood is therefore, in a very special way, the Church's witness to the mystery of Christ in the service of the human community. Where charity and love prevail, God's kingdom has already come among men. It is the call of every priest, to dedicate his life in sacrifice to promote this coming of the kingdom among his brothers and sisters.

11. In the light of this description of the priest as a man totally available for the kingdom of God already at work in all human community, priestly celibacy is revealed as profoundly appropriate. For the celibate priest the call of the kingdom, the vocation to discipleship, the summons to vigilance and to eager expectation of the coming of the Master, have taken on the character of an imperative. This sense of eager expectation and longing for the coming of Christ, which motivates Paul's famous commendation of celibacy (1 Cor. 7), is essentially independent, of course, of the time of that coming. Imminence and certainty are not to be identified. Eschatological hope is less concerned with the particulars of some future event than with a way of Christian existence in the present. For the Christian, the world is always coming to an end: the kingdom of God, man's share in true life, has already begun, and is, here and now, a matter of urgency and crucial decision.

12. What then is the invitation being addressed to the Christian man to whom God offers the gift of the celibate priesthood? He is

being asked if he is willing to identify himself in a special way with Christ's kingdom on earth, that is, with the service of God, mankind and the Church, through a dedication of himself to the deepest concerns of the human family. His fellow Christians, through their bishop, are asking him if he is ready to carry his identification with the entire family of God to the point of renouncing a particular family of his own.

13. Sometimes this special availability of the celibate priest for the service of and witness to human and Christian community is so presented as to suggest either that it has the efficacy of some kind of ritual sign, or that its value is a matter of longer working hours spent in the service of others. Celibacy does have both a symbolic and a practical value for the Church's ministers. But its effectiveness is neither automatic nor magical. It is not a spiritual thing which one puts on or off at will. Celibacy is a way of being human, Christian, priestly. It is a way of loving and hoping and believing. It does not diminish but enlarges the priest's capacity for love. Celibacy does not negate his personality or any of its component parts. The priest's total strength as a man goes into his life of service because he is called to live in the midst of the people in a close and trusting manner. Through his intimacy with Christ in friendship and his relationship with his people, his personality is fully realized, his Christian faith is nourished, and his human love finds fulfillment.

14. Celibacy does not separate the priests from the Christian community; indeed it is the instrument of his full and rich relationship to it. As a husband pledges his life in faith to his wife, so the priest pledges his life to the Christian people. The celibate vocation also joins the priest to man's struggle for a better life on earth. And so we ask priests who may be wavering in their adherence to this difficult vocation to consider whether their total availability for the task of building human community will really be enhanced by a more domestic kind of existence. "The foxes have holes, the birds of the air their nests, but the Son of Man has not whereon to lay his head" (Mt. 8:20). Is it not precisely the pilgrim spirit, the undomestic existence, which is needed, in this age of revolution, in those who identify themselves totally with the radical message of the Gospel? Does not the paradox of life through death in Christ, which is the very core of the word he proclaims and of the mystery he celebrates, find a special embodiment when it is verified in the person—in the very flesh—of the minister himself? Is not his identification

with Christ, High Priest and Victim, profoundly affected by the fact that his own body, through his consecration to celibacy, has been given over to the begetting of the body of Christ which is the Church? And is not the priest more strikingly identified with the family of God as such, with the community of mankind as such, by his willingness to forego a family of his own? Some may offer a negative answer to these questions, or may feel, at least, that the affinity of celibacy and priestly ministry should not be enshrined in a general law requiring celibacy. This is not, however, the response of our Western tradition. The needs of the Church and of the world today, far from persuading us to relinquish this tradition, speak to us rather of the urgent need for the charismatic witness of priestly celibacy.

15. But if this rich potential of celibate existence is to be more fully realized today, the factors which are quite clearly hindering its realization must be honestly faced. We can deal here with only a few of these factors. Hopefully the results of the study of priestly life and ministry which we have authorized will assist us with its research and suggestions.

16. The promotion and defense of priestly celibacy cannot be carried on in isolation from other aspects of a priest's life and ministry. If there is a relation, as we believe between celibacy, community, authority and faith itself, then a crisis in one area is bound to affect the others. No one today would doubt the existence of a crisis in each of these areas. Nor would anyone question that the crisis of priestly life in its totality is cultural as well as spiritual. Like the Christian faith itself, the ministerial priesthood exists only as embodied in men of a given era and within a given cultural environment. It is not only faith in its doctrinal aspects which needs to be articulated in contemporary idioms. The challenge today is to manifest that the Gospel as an integral way of life is viable and dynamic in the new age which is now opening up in man's life on earth. Some recent studies have looked at the American priest from the economic, sociological and psychological points of view. When the resulting insights are integrated with a renewed theological and ascetical appreciation of the conditions of priestly existence, the pressures under which priests are working today will be better understood, and the very difficult problems of priestly fidelity and growth can be approached with more confidence.

17. It must also be acknowledged that despite recent changes there are still many factors in the daily lives of priests which lead

to the frustration of their human and priestly aspirations. For many, perhaps for most, the key problem is not celibacy, but rather a joyful and fruitful style of life and work. The priest, for example, remains fully a man, and his faithful response to the gift of celibacy must be simultaneously a valid realization of his manhood. The priest remains, too, a person endowed with human dignity. Basic human rights and responsibilities must find appropriate realization in the lives of priests. Customs which isolate the priest from the people he serves tend to retard his growth in pastoral identity. Likewise, policies which unduly delay his assumption of major pastoral responsibilities can be corrosive of the zeal of the priest eager to work in freedom and trust. These and other hindrances to fruitful work and a happy life play no small part, we feel, in the painful decisions of many priests to seek elsewhere than in the priestly ministry the fulfillment of their human and Christian potential. We pledge ourselves, therefore, to strive for those conditions which permit priests to live fully for the sake of God's People, to bring them the Good News.

18. All of us, bishops and priests together, should remember that even when external conditions are favorable, growth in this total priestly commitment requires that each of us continually deepen his personal relationship to Christ. If Jesus so often withdrew from His active ministry to spend time alone with His Father, we too must give prayer a central place in our busy lives. Not only should participation in the liturgy of the Eucharist, Sacraments, and Divine Praise be truly personal; we must also seek God in the intimate friendship of private prayer. When we neglect this friendship, we find ourselves empty, lonely, and restless.

St. Paul's words addressed to the Philippians apply in a special way to us priests,

Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who though he was by nature God, did not consider being equal to God a thing to be clung to, but emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave and being made like unto men. And appearing in the form of man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even to death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5-8)

Having found the mind of Christ in prayer, we must likewise share in His emptying of self for service. As Christ accepted the cross for our redemption, we must accept our cross daily to place ourselves

more and more at the service of others. In a genuine sense the priest is no longer his own but he belongs to God and to the people. In this service his model and intimate associate is Mary, the Mother of God and humble "handmaid of the Lord. (Lk. 1:38)"

19. To belong to the people, as well as to fulfill our own human needs, priests must enter into many personal relationships, some of them profound. But unhealthy and self-conscious preoccupation with our personal fulfillment and rights can inhibit growth in that responsible and self-forgetting love which is the spirit of Christ. The priest is asked to be the servant of the human and Christian community; but no man serves well unless he has learned the real meaning of living for others. We will fail both ourselves and those we serve, unless our union with Christ is so strengthened by prayer and discipline that our human relationships be genuinely loving. Only if we have "put on the mind of Christ Jesus" will our friendships with men and women be redemptive as were His.

II. Pastoral Applications

20. From this brief theological witness to the meaning and value of priestly celibacy, we turn to the more directly pastoral aspects of the question. What is to be *done* regarding the present complex of problems?

In historical and theological perspective it is not realistic to expect that a change in the Church's general discipline regarding celibacy is forthcoming. An abandonment of the law of celibacy would clearly raise cultural, economic, educational and pastoral problems of the gravest kind without proportionate gain. And therefore, we again affirm our witness to priestly celibacy. We remind all priests, our brothers and co-operators, of the sacredness of our commitment to a celibate life.

21. We are convinced that the problem of celibacy is often a symptom of deeper problems. In our rapidly changing culture many priests have become confused as to the nature of their priestly service. Some lack a sense of accomplishment. Others feel that they have been inadequately prepared for the new forms of ministry expected of them. In order to improve the preparation of future priests, this National Conference of Catholic Bishops is issuing its new *Program of Priestly Formation*. To assist those who are already priests adjust to new problems, we are also preparing programs of continuing edu-

cation and sponsoring a research program on priestly life and ministry in collaboration with experts from such fields as theology, history and the behavioral sciences.

In the exercise of our responsibility as bishops, we now address pastoral words to particular groups within the Church.

22. With regard to the vast majority of priests, secure in their commitment to celibacy, we wish to express our joy in the Lord. We believe that their understanding of this commitment and their faithful perseverance in it are an important service to the People of God. We want to encourage them to think of their celibacy not in negative terms as a sacrifice to duty, but in positive terms as a source of growth in charity. We feel it an obligation to assist these priests in this growth in Christ through common study and prayer, and we urge them to manifest to fellow priests, to seminarians, and to the laity the meaning celibacy has in their own priestly experience.

23. With regard to our brother priests who are suffering trials and doubts in their celibate commitment, we are ready to render every assistance possible to help them resolve these doubts. We are aware that in the life of every man, especially if he has professional responsibilities, there are times of self-doubt with its consequent dangers. The young frequently have worries about their adequacy for tasks whose difficulties they did not anticipate. Those in middle life often suffer from a sense of failure, disillusionment and low self-esteem. Men in the later stages of their work or approaching retirement are sometimes deeply depressed and lonely.

We shall increase our efforts to provide priests in such circumstances with competent psychological and spiritual counseling. Personnel procedures should take full account of a priest's individual talents, interests and preparation, and respect his human dignity. The service of the Church and a proper sense of personal worth will thereby be enhanced. During a period of trial it may be advisable to relieve a man of undue pressures—for example, through a suitable change of work, a period of spiritual renewal, or in some cases a leave of absence from active priestly ministry. It is of fundamental importance that the deeper causes of disturbance be investigated, to determine whether problems about celibacy are basically symptomatic. It is possible that some of those asking to be laicized are actually seeking to escape from problems of personal adjustment, which would be better faced within the context of their priestly com-

mitment. In any case, priests should not judge the value of their work according to the more measurable standards of other walks of life; Jesus Himself appeared to be a failure, yet effected the salvation of the world.

24. With regard to those priests who have made a final decision to ask for a dispensation from their priestly obligations, and those who have taken the unfortunate step of entering marriage without a dispensation, certain things should be said. Contrary to a rather widespread impression, bishops have shown compassion in their efforts to help these priests secure dispensations without undue delay or anguish; nor is it necessary for a priest to enter into an invalid marriage in order to obtain a dispensation. We also note that a priest may seek a dispensation from celibacy not only through his own bishop but through any Ordinary.

We acknowledge that at times there has been a lack of consistency in procedures in this matter. Certain traditional provisions, aimed at reducing scandal and discouraging hasty withdrawal from the priesthood and celibacy, today often prove ineffective. We favor greater consistency in such procedures.

In addition to continuous improvement of juridical procedures, other ways must be sought to help priests during and after the period of their transition to the lay state. Although they are outside the priestly ministry, their talents and education should not be lost to the Church and the human community. In this regard we commend the efforts of those, especially fellow priests, who are helping these priests to continue their commitment to Christ in the lay state. We feel that a maximum of understanding and practical assistance given to these brothers in Christ will reduce the temptation to exercise a priestly ministry apart from unity with the bishop. It would be ironic if, at the time when the Christian Churches are coming together, the Catholic community should be further fragmented.

25. With regard to seminarians, whom we hope someday to welcome as cooperators in our ministry, we ask them to present themselves for ordination only if they feel ready and willing, in full honesty and freedom, to commit themselves to a life-long celibate priesthood.

Professors and other members of the seminary staff, especially spiritual directors, should present celibacy as it is. It is not only a legal requirement but a gift from Christ and a powerful aid to priestly service. By their own attitudes and examples as well as by their

teaching they should communicate to their students a genuine love for this gift. The seminarian can thus appreciate the importance of a full sacramental life and of the personal discipline of prayer, asceticism, study, and Christian action for growth in his celibate dedication to Christ.

Through our forthcoming *Program of Priestly Formation*, we intend to continue our efforts to improve the quality and circumstances of training young men for the priesthood, so that ordination takes place only with that degree of psychological and spiritual maturity called for in priestly life and ministry today.

26. With regard to the laity, we are grateful for the love, respect and encouragement they have traditionally shown toward priests. This continues to be a great source of strength and joy to all of us in our priestly vocation. Today, perhaps more than ever, priests need the support of the entire Christian family, for whose service they have embraced the celibate life. The laity can sustain and strengthen their priests by a life of prayer, sacrifice, and practical Christian concern and friendship. In this way they respond to St. Paul's exhortation, "Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2)."

CONCLUSION

27. This statement on the heritage of priestly celibacy will obviously not be the last word spoken on the subject. We do not anticipate universal agreement with all its positions. Some will find it unduly concessive, others excessively restrictive. We welcome every constructive criticism which may contribute in any way to a better understanding of the gift of priestly celibacy in the life of the Church. We are united in our concern both that the tradition of priestly celibacy should be maintained in its integrity and that this tradition should find, within the currents of contemporary life, fresh understanding and new supports. Only in this way will the tradition continue to enrich the life of the Church and of mankind. We ask all priests and all the faithful to receive this message with an open heart, to ponder it seriously, and to join with us in our efforts to realize more fully the potential of priestly celibacy for advancing the kingdom of God and the community of mankind. Finally, we ask all Catholics to pray that God may give to His Church, bishops and priests who will be worthy ministers of the Gospel and faithful disciples of the great High Priest, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

