



December 20, 2009
Fourth Sunday of Advent

St. Anne
CATHOLIC
COMMUNITY

“Most blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”—Luke 1:42

Dear Friends;

I once heard a rabbi commenting on the Roman Catholic custom of priestly mandated celibacy. He observed that it is first, a violation of the first commandment that God gives humanity in Genesis, “Be fruitful and multiply.” This why the barrenness of Elizabeth (today’s gospel passage) was seen to be a curse or punishment—you were not fulfilling God’s command.

Secondly on a practical level the good rabbi commented that from a Jewish perspective they want the brightest and best to be rabbis. Why would you not want the brightest and best to have children? From the Jewish view it would be crazy to remove these men from the gene pool.

What the pregnancies of Mary and Elizabeth point to are hope. Children are the future of our race. Each child holds the promise of a new world. To bear children is to be co-creators with God and stewards of the world’s future. This is why we invest so much of our time, energy and love in these our children.

The child that Mary bears will change the world. Each child that we bear brings with them unique and irreplaceable gifts. To bear children is a supreme act of self-giving and hospitality.

There is a type a misanthropy that sees children as a threat to our future, well-being, comfort and convenience. In the developed countries of the world the birthrates have plummeted. If this does not change, those cultures will be replaced by those that have birthrates that are not in the negative.

As far as priestly celibacy is concerned, St Thomas Aquinas admits that it is a violation of the first commandment. He says then that it is only justifiable if it is subordinated to a higher good—that is service to the kingdom. Celibacy can be a sign value of the transcendence of the kingdom of God. However, the celibate is to channel that divine energy in other ways. He or she is called to fulfill the command to be generative—life-giving.

Originally celibacy was confined to those who lived in religious communities. Diocesan priests like their Eastern Catholic and Orthodox counterparts could be married. There is nothing intrinsic to priesthood that demands celibacy. If that were true the first thousand years of the Church’s priesthood would be invalid. That would include popes and in some cases their sons who became pope would be null.

The reason for priestly celibacy for the diocesan clergy was not theological but practical. Since in the Middle Ages they did not have a cash economy there were no salaries. Since they were not paid priests derived a livelihood from properties attached to the church. Their children would inherit these. If none of the children became a priest they had to employ a priest for the parish. Many times they did not. To end this abuse the church made celibacy a requirement. Children could not inherit so when a priest died a new one could be assigned.

Of course, afterward a whole pious mythology developed about why celibacy was necessary but this is fiction. I have never bought the idea that somehow the demands of a priest’s life are more than any other professional. Some priests would have you believe that. And celibacy isn’t necessarily a great sacrifice especially as one gets older—for some it is a comfortable bachelorhood.

My father was a doctor and he was out of the house all night more than any priest I know. The skills of a doctor can mean the difference between life and death. And he was still able to be a good father to his ten children. If he could, why couldn’t a priest? What would be so horrible about that? Celibacy has value but so does bearing children.

Faced with a critical shortage of priests, maybe its time to drop pious fictions and admit those who follow God’s first commandment, to be fruitful, to the priesthood. Would that not also be a great witness to God’s command?

Peace,

Fr. Ron