

he has to employ theory to do so. 'What matters,' said Marx, 'is not to understand the world but to change it.' But that was a theoretical statement even though about praxis. The corresponding practical judgment would be not about praxis but about the world.

On Priestly Marriage: A Response To

Father Hastings' On Celibacy

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Scandalous news has a way of getting around the world at a speed which is truly mystifying. The news of what was described to me as Adrian Hastings' latest eccentricity was no exception. "Fr. Hastings," I was told some time in May right here in Ngara, "is this time proclaiming disobedience to his bishop as a virtue and trumpeting the announcement of his forthcoming wedding".

In late September, I finally got hold of the offending piece ("On Celibacy", *New Blackfriars*, March 1978, pp. 104 - 111). I soon felt less sorry for Fr. Hastings than for his detractors. In truth, I know of many priests who feel the way Fr Hastings says he does, with the difference that being better able to articulate the reasons for his feeling he can express it as a legitimate stand. Before I could quite make out the value of Fr Hastings' arguments, I already felt sure that the most solid support for his position came from the saying of Jesus: "Go learn the meaning of the words: what I want is mercy, not sacrifice" (Mt. 9:13).

The fact, however, that so many members of the Church who cannot lightly be accused of hypocrisy still maintain that all priests must lead a celibate life prevents me from sharing Fr Hast-

ings' certainty in upholding the opposite view. Perhaps there are reasons beyond my understanding yet within theirs which make it wrong or at least inopportune to repeal the law of celibacy. Yet, one cannot be blamed for voicing an opinion and mine is that Fr Hastings, as a Catholic priest, is indeed free to marry, as are all Catholic priests who did not choose celibacy for its own sake but only agreed to it as to a *conditio sine qua non* to fulfil their vocation to the priesthood.

The little experience acquired over the years in counselling candidates to the priesthood tells me that there is more than a theoretical distinction between call to celibacy and call to priesthood. It is heart-breaking to have to dissuade from becoming a priest a young man who has the potential required to achieve his goal, just because he lacks that extraneous charism of perfect chastity which religious rightly exalt but should jealously keep to themselves. With time, I came to see that this process of side-tracking young people away from their rightful orientation was not only distressing, it was unjust on two counts: because it created frustration in the candidate who had to abandon a clearly identified call to the ministry (others managed to convince themselves that they must have a call to celibacy, only to be the victims of painful tragedies later); and because it deprived communities of pastors whom they needed and had both the right and the possibility to have. A further remark, derived from comparing the experience of counselling in a Diocesan Major Seminary to that of counselling in a Theological College for missionaries: there is no way, at least none that I know, one can convincingly explain to future Diocesan priests that celibacy must be the rule for all of them, yet one can with little difficulty show a future missionary that his life-long commitment to the ministry *wherever needed* will be greatly facilitated by leaving behind the very idea of having wife and children.

So, whatever the opprobrium which might eventually be piled on my head, I must say that I side with Fr Hastings rather than with his detractors on the issue of priestly marriage. I have, however, one reservation to express and a couple of corrections to propose. The reservation is about the use of his Christian liberty which Fr Hastings proposes to make. Catholic priests are indeed free to marry and the law which pretends to forbid them to do so is obsolete, agreed. Yet, before actually taking their bride to the altar, those who treasure the knowledge of that freedom should do well to pause and to consider Paul's warning to those Corinthian elite who knew better: "All things are lawful, but not all things build up" (I Cor. 10:23). One must be patient with the brethren whose mind is slower to understand, so that the promoting of liberty does not end up disrupting the community. Whatever the

strictures still imposed from on high, there is, at the People of God's lowly level at which most of us operate, more open-mindedness on the question of priestly marriage than there was, say, seventeen years ago, when I was ordained. What about giving the matter another ten years, while those with an enlightened conscience busy themselves explaining to their brothers with a scrupulous conscience why they should discard their fear?

Now, the corrections. I think Fr Hastings's many times restated appeal for the "widespread ordination of tried and tested men, such as the better trained catechists", is misleading. I do not object to a development by which priests might marry or married people might be ordained, but the idea of ordaining catechists to the priesthood is a quite different matter. As I see it operating in Africa, the catechist's ministry is distinct from that of priesthood and sufficiently substantial to count as a terminal order in its own right. Possibly, some catechists happen to also have a vocation to celibacy, in which case they can be ordained priests. *Amalgamating ministries into one single office* is, however, a dangerous road which Fr Hastings, lamenting as he does the confusion created by the historical amalgamation of priesthood and celibacy, should beware of recommending. Besides, not having enough priests can, as it has in the Diocese in which I work at present, favour the sharing of the pastorate among several ministries . . . and quite honestly, I have come to prefer a situation in which there are not enough priests to one in which there are too many.

Finally, just how frequent the celebration of the Eucharist should be is an arguable issue, one on which Fr Hastings seems to me to lack flexibility. The present local experiment of regrouping the faithful into small communities is taking as its worshipping act the celebration of the Word rather than that of the Eucharist. When you see the results of that policy, you do not shed tears over the past belief which made Sunday Mass a must and you do not cry too loud for always more priests.