

Reviews

A PRIESTLESS PEOPLE? A NEW VISION FOR THE CATHOLIC PRIESTHOOD by Vincent McLaughlin *The Canterbury Press, Norwich, 1998. Pp. xii + 164, £7.99 pbk.*

The prospect of marriage for priests of the Roman Rite is currently a taboo topic for leaders of the Catholic Church. Neither Pope John XXIII nor Paul VI allowed the matter to be debated openly during the Second Vatican Council. Of all the subsequent Roman episcopal synods, not one has been allowed to discuss the issue forthrightly. Meanwhile, the world's population of priests continues to decline unabatedly. All the more noteworthy, therefore is Vincent McLaughlin's welcome book.

Having lived and laboured as a priest, Vincent McLaughlin applied to be laicized in 1972. His request was approved in 1973 when he was also granted canonical freedom to marry. *A Priestless People?* was written after more than two decades of marriage and with the benefit of manifold experiences as a priest. The book was finished shortly before its author died of cancer in 1996. His wife, Imelda, added an eloquent epilogue to the text.

The final product is much more than an *apologia* for married clergy. It outlines a rich theology of the church, of the eucharist, of human relations, and of Christian ministry. The text is divided into nine chapters that address such issues as the current chronic shortage of priests, the training of priests, the history of the law of clerical celibacy, the sexual dimension of Christian life, the meaning of the Mass, and the essence of ministerial priesthood. The book is irenic in tone; informed, indeed scholarly, in its content; prudent in its judgements; and articulate in the presentation of its case.

The book is intended as 'a simple plea to all who love the church to think and to pray hard about our present problems' p. xi. Among those problems is the sharp decline in the numbers of Catholic priests since Vatican II. Vincent McLaughlin draws attention to two major reasons for the current shortage of priests. The first is that since Vatican II well over 100,000 priests have resigned from active ministry for a variety of reasons. Strikingly, 'half of all American priests under the age of 60 have left' (p. 6). The second reason adduced for a shortage of priests is the drastic decline in the numbers of men studying for the priesthood in the West.

Hence the title of this book, which raises the question of whether the people of God will eventually run out of priests. An obvious way of redressing the decline in the numbers of priests would be allow some men to minister as married priests. Although there are Christian traditions that allow married priests, yet which also witness a decline in their numbers of clergy, several Catholic men who have resigned from the priesthood over the past three decades have nominated obligatory celibacy as a hindrance to their human well-being. Vincent McLaughlin says that Catholic priests were permitted to marry right up until the twelfth century. What was possible before then, therefore, could once again be allowed, since clerical

celibacy is a variable ecclesiastical law. In addition, if presbyters in the East are permitted wives, then surely what obtains in one geographical region is permissible in another, namely, the Latin West.

The linchpin in the argument of this book is the conclusion that human love, sexually expressed, is neither an impediment to holiness nor a debilitating hindrance to the effective practice of publicly instituted Christian ministry. At least twelve centuries of Christian life and thought attest to the legitimacy of such a case. With the current drop in the number of clergy, such an argument can only be ignored to the Church's detriment. Or is it a good thing that a Christian cultic priesthood becomes extinct or largely ineffective?

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LIBERATING ESCHATOLOGY. ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF LETTY M. RUSSELL edited by Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1999. Pp. 261, £20.

This book is a tribute to the Yale theologian, Letty Russell. The introduction by the editors gives a flavour of what is to come in its reference first of all to a meal rather than writing as one of the peculiar contributions of a much-loved and respected theologian.

The book is divided into four parts. Three introductory essays by J.Shannon Clarkson, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Shawn Copeland consider the distinctive characteristics of the theology and praxis of Letty Russell. Part 2 (taking up the importance of the table as a site of theology) includes an evocative essay by Phyllis Trible on the bible in the round; Katharine Sakenfeld on Ruth 4; Elsa Tamez on Ezekiel 47 and dreaming from exile; Katie Cannon on Hurston's account of the Ruby McCollum trial; James Cone on Martin's dream or Malcolm's nightmare; and Mercy Oduyoye in a searingly personal study on the childless woman in West Africa which persistently questions cultural stereotypes in her own and every society. Part 3 is entitled liberating theology: the work of the table. It includes essays by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza on the Jesus movement as a *basileia* movement, Kwok Pui-Lan on women, nature and eschatological hope, and Beverly Harrison on feminist theologies at the Millennium. Part 4 focuses more on eschatology, with Sharon Ringe writing on the Spirit and the Church in the Fourth Gospel, Jürgen Moltmann on the theme of liberating and anticipating the future, Joan Martin on womanist eschatology and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz on Mujerista narratives.

There are interesting reflections in plenty among the various essays contained in this volume, much of which relates to the subject of eschatology and its importance for Christian theology and the liberating character of the Christian gospel. What is most striking about this collection is the character and contribution of Letty Russell who is honoured by the various essays. Two things in particular are striking about what is found here. First of all, there is the sense of an enthusiasm for the subject which is communicated as much by a way of life in celebration and conversation as by high-powered writing and argument. Secondly, in a world where theological superstars are respected and international