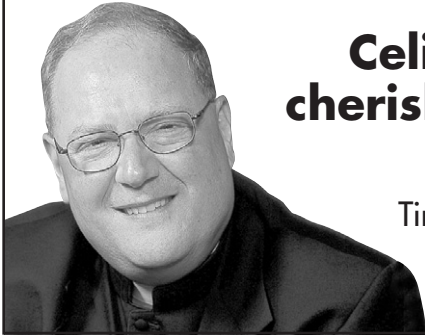


CATHOLIC HERALD

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HERALD OF HOPE



Celibacy is gift cherished by church

Archbishop
Timothy M. Dolan

Last week at this time, Aug. 28th, the Feast of St. Augustine, was the first anniversary of my installation as your archbishop. As you might imagine, it was a day of prayerful gratitude and recommitment. Morning prayer went longer than usual as I engaged in a “litany of thanksgiving.” It should not surprise anyone that, near the top of that litany, came the great priests of this archdiocese. Never will I forget processing into the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist last year to be greeted by hundreds and hundreds of concelebrating brother priests, exuberant, smiling, embracing, applauding. Their welcome has not let up this past year. My admiration for them is so high, enhanced by the challenges they face at this time in the history of the church, with the sting of scandal, the burden of administration in tough economic times, the scrutiny and criticism of so many, and the increasing demands caused by declining numbers. I have said it so often to our priests that they tease me about it, but I say it again: I love them and I thank them.

I want to listen to them, and certainly have tried to do so this first year, as they have approached me individually,

through the presbyteral council, at our clergy days, at district meetings, at our assembly of priests last May, and in luncheons and gatherings I have hosted at my home. They speak to me with candor, trust, and conviction.

So, when 160 of them speak, I want to listen with special respect, interest, and attention. A few weeks ago, as you may know, a letter signed by 28 percent of the priests of the archdiocese was sent to the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Most Rev. Wilton D. Gregory, expressing the opinion that the church allow optional celibacy for future candidates for the diocesan priesthood. His reply is found on Page 5 of our Catholic Herald. I am very grateful for Bishop Gregory’s thoughtful and compelling response, and concur with it wholeheartedly.

It is most appropriate for me to weigh in now with my own observations on this exchange of correspondence.

For one, I want to clarify an important point. Some of the media reports on this issue note that I knew of this letter, implying that I was comfortable with the initiative, if not outright sup-

portive of it. This is inaccurate. Did I know of it? The dean of the district where it first surfaced thoughtfully advised me of the initiative last December, informing me that the priests of the district did not want it to become a “district initiative;” I was then present at the priests’ council meeting where the three initiators of the correspondence were advised by the members that the council did not feel it appropriate to endorse or sponsor such a letter. I was never asked my thoughts on the letter. The first time I saw it in its final form was on the pages of our local newspaper when I was on vacation. The initiators were not under any obligation to consult with me ... but I wish they would have done so.

Two, the impression is often given that, as an archbishop and a so-called “Vatican loyalist,” I have to support the church’s tradition of priestly celibacy, but that my heart, as the hearts of most other bishops, is really not in it. This impression is simply wrong. I enthusiastically and confidently embrace my own celibate commitment, and believe it a providential blessing for priests and for the church. It is a gift cherished by the church since the time of Jesus, common among the ordained from apostolic times, expected of priests from early centuries, and required of them for close to 1,000 years. It is not some stodgy Vatican “policy” that has been “imposed,” but a gift savored for millennia. I wholeheartedly support it, not because I’m “supposed to,” or because I reluctantly “have to,” but because I want to, and because I sincerely and enthusiastically believe it is a genuine gift to the church and her priests.

Three, the reports would have

us believe that this letter is revolutionary and novel, requiring “courage” in a climate where free discussion on this issue is rare. Courage, I would propose, characterizes rather all our priests — those who signed and the 72 percent who did not — who live their celibate chastity with fidelity and joy; courage characterizes our married couples who generously and obediently live out their vows; courage is found in our young people and unmarried adults who follow the teaching of Jesus, the Bible, and the church on the beautiful virtue of chastity; courage is found in those writers — priests, religious, lay, Catholic and non-Catholic — who defend such a countercultural virtue as celibacy in a world that feels one cannot be happy or whole without sexual gratification.

The discussion over celibacy is not new. That 28 percent of our priests ask for a recommendation of the discipline is hardly shocking, as the polls have told us this for decades. As one priest wrote me, “The problem is not that we don’t talk about optional celibacy; the problem is that we’ve talked it to death the last 40 years.” Bishop Gregory correctly observes that the charism has been reaffirmed by all recent popes, from Blessed John XXIII, Paul VI, and today, often and eloquently by John Paul II; it was extolled and renewed at the Second Vatican Council; and subsequent Synods of Bishops and individual national conferences of bishops, including our own, have accepted the teaching with conviction and gratitude.

The church, of course, listens intently to many voices, and loud voices are not lacking today. She listens to petitions, committees, authors, advocacy groups, even columnists and editorial writers

in newspapers, all free with advice. But she first and foremost listens to Jesus, His Word, and, as my teacher and mentor Msgr. John Tracy Ellis used to say, she listens, “Not to the voice of today as much as to the voice of the centuries.” That voice — of saints, scholars, and faithful of the past — speaks eloquently in praise of celibate chastity for priests, a praise admirably echoed by the signers of the letter as well.

Four, I am very happy that Bishop Gregory invited the signers to engage in a dialogue, not about celibacy, but about some of the urgent pastoral issues that are affecting priesthood and the church today, especially the decline in vocations (characteristic, as the bishop notes, not only of our Catholic Church, but also of other religious bodies who allow a married ministry), the place of religion and the church in a society that more and more acts as if it can get along just fine without God and religion, and the call for renewal in priestly life within the church. We have been doing this well in the archdio-

cese, but can probably do it better; this initiative may prod us to do so.

Finally, I worry about the timing of the letter. I’m not talking here about the fact that it was released to the media before Bishop Gregory ever received it, or that it came out when I was on my announced vacation. No. I mean that this is the time we priests need to be renewing our pledge to celibacy, not questioning it. The problems in the church today are not caused by the teaching of Jesus and of his church, but by lack of fidelity to them. The recent sad scandal of clerical sexual abuse of minors, as the professionals have documented, has nothing to do with our celibate commitment; and the undeniable challenges of scandal,

shortages, increasing work, and public criticism have left a priesthood not disheartened and decimated, but — if recent studies are to be believed — on the verge of renewal. Recall the research recently completed by the Los Angeles Times that found more than 90 percent of American priests happy, committed, and eager to do it all over again if given the choice.

This is the spirit of hope and confidence I gratefully sense in our priests — both in those who signed and those who did not. It is also obvious in our wonderful seminarians, now close to 30 strong — the largest number in years — who tell me that celibacy was actually part of the appeal of the radical call to priesthood, and who have thought long and

hard about the joys and demands of this celibate vocation, having to defend it to family, friends, and even former girlfriends! The call of Pope John Paul II, “Love for Jesus and his church must be the passion of your lives,” rings in their ears as they yearn to join the priests of this great archdiocese who have inspired their own vocations.

The most exciting invitation in Bishop Gregory’s letter is that we use this moment in the life of the church to promote the interior renewal of our priests, leading to a purified, even-more-committed priesthood. As one priest wrote, “While I did not sign the letter, and while I am not supportive of the call for optional celibacy, I do share in the desire of my brothers to tackle head-on the array of problems facing us in contemporary ministry, especially the need for renewed holiness, joy, confidence, and faithfulness.

I conclude where I started: my brother priests, all of you — those who signed the petition and those who did not — I love you! I need you! I thank you! We have our work cut out for us.



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