

Our Readers Write



*Fr. Charles Schmitt
is a former
Conventual
Franciscan friar.
Married for almost
30 years, he
continues his
ministry through his
association with
CITI Ministries
www.citiministries.org*

I read your most recent article for CORPUS REPORTS (*Mandatory Celibacy and Mandatory Chastity: Not Humanly Possible* Autumn 2021). I found it fascinating and much of it resonated with me.

The prevailing theme outlining the destructive nature of loneliness and the suppression of the basic human need for intimacy as is often an integral part of mandated celibacy is spot on. I just met with my friend of 50 years, an active priest, and this is exactly what we discussed at lunch particularly as it pertains to my own experience.

He agrees that there are a very limited number of people who have, shall I say, the charism to live a celibate life. I explained to him that having a life-partner, someone with whom we can share our innermost thoughts and feelings (intimacy of the mind and heart, and of course physical intimacy) and actually getting real, audible feedback is almost sacramental, an experience of *vox dei*, God's voice in a tangible manner.

Far more effective than trying to plumb the depths of God's will/plan via mental prayer, despite my best efforts early on. When conducting Pre-Cana for my couples, I tell them in no uncertain terms that I am a better man, a better human being and far better and effective minister because of this person in my life.

My pastoral counseling professor had a saying: "a sexual act is not necessarily an act of sex." In other words, sexual release can have at its core more than the expression of sexuality.

Your citing of "prison sex" comes to mind here. Upon release from jail, the individual who might otherwise be heterosexual, returns to sexual relations which are consonant with that sexual orientation. It is interesting to note that seminary or celibate priesthood is akin to the isolation and restrictions on human intimacy imposed on prisoners.

We were always warned about "particular friendships" and those found forming such relationships were suspected of having "certain tendencies." Not that being suspected of these tendencies often came to anything, since it appears that there was a "pink underground" and the culture fostered this duplicity.

As a confessor, speaking to someone confessing to homosexual activity despite being a heterosexual who is now happily married with children, I recall asking the question, "so if you are not gay, why do you find yourself in this situation?" I will never forget the answer: "it's about the need for human connection; intimacy more than an expression of sexual identity." I have always felt that celibacy does violence to our nature as human beings and demanding this lifestyle is an affront to the creator who made us this way. This is who we are, not an aberration for which we need to do penance or otherwise stifle.

The authors you cited I have read in the past. They all give valuable insight into things which I experienced and observed during my eighteen years as a friar. On the one hand, viewing it as an outsider, the

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word hypocrite comes to mind. But being more charitable, one might refer to the behaviors that result from a starvation of quality human connections as being “temporary insanity.” For the most part, being removed from this environment, like prisoners finishing their sentence, the “ecclesiastic prisoners” return to a “normal life” in a society often viewed by present day culture warriors as antithetical to a life of holiness.

To deny our biology is ludicrous. Men are constantly preoccupied with discharging accumulated fluid created in glands. It is almost laughable all the sins ascribed to this biological imperative, and yet, how the church has quietly acknowledged this fact over the centuries.

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What comes to mind is a conversation I had with my mother after my ordination as we discussed what was talked about in her Pre-Cana experience. She said that as far as sex was concerned, women were not supposed to enjoy it, otherwise they were sluts, but it was the woman’s “duty,” the wifely or womanly duty to provide as much sex for her husband (as she could tolerate.) Pretty sad, especially coming from an institution run entirely by men.

Apart from the obvious physiological component that this denial of “biological and social needs” creates, is the psychological damage created in men who prior to religious or priestly formation were, for all intents and purposes, well-adjusted and mature at the age of eighteen, which was how old my generation

was when entering religious life. This was the rule; there were exceptions. The process of “ninnification” commenced with receiving the habit. We were broken down and reduced to children, jockeying for attention, validation, acknowledgment, and affirmation. There was rarely any attempt to rebuild after stripping away. At least the military (which many of us were avoiding during the Vietnam era) had a plan for taking young eighteen-year-olds and turning them into men.

On the eve of our investiture (reception of the habit and beginning of novitiate) we were jokingly told we were “taking off the old man and putting on the old woman.” Really...how androgynous. But truer words were never spoken. And thus began our sojourn into a world with little connection to reality or to one another.

Much of the psychological damage done to us was a byproduct of an unrealistic approach to engendering mature males in a spiritual world akin to Alice behind the looking glass. I cannot say there was malicious intent, but the system had a modus operandi intent on re-creating us in some mold, although in retrospect, I’m not exactly sure what. The odd thing about this is the fact that most of us were positive that most of this was silly, medieval nonsense. Those who absolutely could not abide this crap, departed rather quickly, some hung in there for a while and left, the rest of us rode the train to crazy town and got the brass ring with ordination. There are those who have courageously stuck it out thinking naively they might be in a position to fix it, the vast majority of us said goodbye when we realized that remaining any longer was doing further damage to already messed up psyches.

Looking back and seeing where I was headed had I stayed, I recognize that I chose self over calling and mission; a perfect act of egoism which was quite contrary to a life of humility at least some of us worker bees were expected to practice and exhibit. Yet that “egoism” was in fact self-preservation, something an institution that is so “pro-life” doesn’t get or approve of.

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It is sad to think that the imposition of mandatory celibacy was done apparently with little or no regard for the health and well-being of its religious and clergy. For an institution that constantly refers to natural law to justify its sexual ethics, stance on LGBTQ rights and acceptance, birth control, abortion, etc., isn't it just as contrary to natural law to demand people live celibate lives?

This is why I believe that the so-called appeal to natural law is deeply flawed and it is finally time to make progress, to change and adapt to our contemporary understanding of human sexuality and to finally let go of the thirteenth century works of

Aquinas who surely did the best he could in a time and place which greatly influenced his thinking and understanding.

I believe that all too often the law or demand is made prior to the creation of the philosophy or theology developed to justify it. The mental gymnastics utilized to "make it so" often defy reasonable common sense. I believe that the Holy Spirit was sent to teach, correct and inspire our ongoing understanding of the faith and the ability to hear the Spirit's voice is not limited

to the ears of the ordained clergy. Many of the greatest movements and reforms found their way to the mainstream of the Church via the folks in the pew. To disregard this fact is the greatest blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and continues the myth that father knows best.

The sad part about the rampant clericalism that embodies this attitude is that father just doesn't get it because father, as the new generation of culture warriors appears to suggest, is too busy trying to maintain the status quo and thus isn't even listening. He continues on this destructive path at his own peril, since he will eventually be preaching to fewer and fewer souls willing to buy what he's selling.

Editor's Note:

The documented evidence presented by Louise Haggett, "*Mandatory Celibacy and Mandatory Chastity—Not Humanly Possible*" (Autumn Issue 2021) provided new scientific data on the biological connection between clergy sexual abuse and mandatory celibacy/intense loneliness. Thanks to Charlie Schmitt for the above comments regarding this personal experiences. Other reflections are invited. lhaggett@aol.com

