

REVIEW OF EDGAR DAVIE, *ILLICIT CELIBACY AND THE DEPOSIT OF FAITH* (2007)

Believing that variety is the spice of life, in this issue of *ARCC Light* we offer a review of an unusual but extremely persuasive book on a hotly-disputed topic – mandatory clerical celibacy.

The Vatican, especially under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has been adamant on maintaining mandatory celibacy for Catholic priests. The Church argues that celibacy is sacred, and that the priest's celibacy is a symbol of Christ's marriage to the Church. John Paul II was so taken with this idea that priests who wanted to be laicized in order to marry during his pontificate had to wait at least ten years before the Vatican would even consider their cases.

But edicts, pat symbolism, and wishful thinking have not laid the issue to rest, despite the possibility of papal displeasure at any questioning of the rightness of, indeed, the necessity for, priestly celibacy.

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grown children and an active, inquiring mind.

Some years ago, he began to wonder how the Church had come to embrace mandatory clerical celibacy. Finding conflicting claims, he started to seriously research the question. This book – almost 200 pages of densely-packed information – is the fascinating result of that research.

In his desire to be thorough and complete, Mr. Davie gives the reader a great deal of information – indeed, he gives almost too much, and there are repetitions which can the reader might find somewhat disorienting. That is, unfortunately, a risk in trying to write the intellectual and political history of a controversial idea which was proposed and fought for a thousand years in the Western and to a lesser degree, the Eastern Church. It is also almost inevitable when dealing with local history in a period of frequently interrupted communications.

As Mr Davie rightly points out, Christianity was born a Jewish religion, and it remained Jewish for many years. Celibacy was not a highlyheld

Jewish value. On the contrary, the Old Testament has God telling man quite clearly to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth. Christ's apostles were clearly married, St. Paul may or may not have married during his ministry, and some scholars find the lack of any mention of a wife for Jesus to be surprising, and possibly the result of later editing of the texts that became the Gospels. Be that as it may, clearly the body, marriage and the production of children were seen as extremely positive in the early Church. The texts saying that widows should not be forced to remarry were just that: a plea for their freedom of action, for their freedom to serve the community full-time or prepare for the expected coming of Christ if they wished. Davie's careful examination of the literature of the two centuries before the accession of Constantine in the early fourth century makes it very clear that Christian priests were usually married, and their sons tended to imitate them and become priests as well. House churches were often, in fact, family businesses. In the Roman Empire, Christianity found itself in competition, as it were, with many other religions, mystery cults and Greek philosophy. It was, however, as the Church moved more into the Hellenized East, especially after the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, that it became less tied to its Jewish roots.

It was in the Hellenized East that the Patristic Fathers whose names are still so familiar – Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, Gregory, Augustine, Jerome – became the dominant thinkers and writers of Christianity. With them, the gnostic and Manichean suspicion of the physical world, and especially women and the physical body with their needs and demands, came to the fore and celibacy became the most holy state. The first mandated celibacy for priests was decreed at the Council of Elvira, Spain, in AD 306, but, given the poor communications of the times and the lack of a reigning Pope, it was not implemented. However, over the following centuries, numerous increasingly harsh decrees were passed relating to married priests, such as

reducing their wives and children to slavery, until the Second Lateran Council in 1139 finally forbade the marriage of priests. It only took 1100 years! By then the Eastern Church had separated itself from Rome, so mandatory celibacy was not an issue for Eastern Rite priests unless they wished to become bishops.

Mr Davie is certainly not the first to see gnostic philosophy as a major factor in changing Christianity's view of the body, sexuality, all of created matter, from good and positive to dangerous and to be avoided, as perusals of the works of Hans Jonas, Robert M. Grant, Peter Brown and others attest, but he might be one of or the first to link the imposition and maintenance of mandatory clerical celibacy to Gnosticism this forcefully.

As mentioned earlier, Davie examines and analyses the controversy over mandatory celibacy in great detail and thus provides a huge amount of information on philosophers, theologians, and Church Councils. That is the strength of this book but occasionally it is also its weakness. Despite his careful chronological organization and good use of chapter headings and subheadings, one occasionally feels overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the information. Since there is no index in this book, the reader might do well to write a broad outline of significant people and events as he or she reads to simplify retrieving data later. There is also, unfortunately, a great deal of repetition of basic questions and ideas. When one is as deeply believing and as convinced of the wrongness and damage of a practice as Davie is, it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of emphasis and repetition objectively. This book was definitely in need of a professional editor with a fearless red pencil to catch the typos, trim away the excess, and tighten the flow of the text. Good editors can unfortunately be difficult to find and expensive when one does find them, which are serious problems in self-published books on tight budgets.

For all the books's limitations, Mr. Davie proves his point: mandatory clerical celibacy was

not part of the original Deposit of Faith, and it has not been an accepted part of Church practice, let alone dogma, since the Apostles. As summarized particularly in chapters 16 through 20, it is most fundamentally a means of control – control of priests by isolating them, control of Church property by preventing its being bequeathed to offspring, and control of truth and healthy sexuality by passing off man-made rules as divine law.

Mr Davie knows the shortcomings of his book. His hope is that a more expert writer, a theologian, will be able to take the material he has unearthed and create a scholarly work worthy of this critically important problem. We share his hope.

Christine M. Roussel