

Priests, sex and celibacy



How do Catholic clergy deal with the church's requirement for celibacy? Desmond Zwar spoke to four men about living a life where there should be no sex.

A few years ago I began researching a book into how priests dealt with the requirement that they be celibate. I placed an advertisement in *The Swag* - the journal of the National Council of Priests - seeking priests who would be willing to talk to me about their relationship with celibacy, whether they found it easy or difficult to maintain. About eight priests responded. I interviewed them by phone, taped the conversations and returned the edited version to each priest for review. This is an edited extract of my conversations with four of them.

MARTIN

"We talked a lot about celibacy in the seminary. For me it means regular self-appraisal, and a bit of doubt as well. It was easier for me as I had 15 years teaching in the secondary system. As a single fellow, when you are teaching secondary students, you are teaching girls as well who are in many ways at their physical peak.

And I had to think to myself: 'Well, how do I relate to these girls?' I had to acknowledge to myself that they were attractive to me; I'd be a fool if I didn't think that.

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But that doesn't mean taking the further step of trying to get a physical relationship."

How did you suppress your sexual feelings?

"I think they are natural. If I tried to suppress them I'd be storing up trouble for myself in the future. So I acknowledge to myself: 'Yes, that is a beautiful girl'. The thing that stood by me was: 'God created it, but you are not allowed to play with it!'

It's a gift from God - this beautiful person - and I find that gift precious.

We discussed celibacy a lot in the seminary. We looked at it not as a giving up, but a giving for. Being celibate means you are always able to be open to one more relationship. If you are in a relationship with another person, to a degree that has to be exclusive; other people have to be kept out.

Being celibate means there is always another friend you can make. When I entered the seminary there wasn't a lot explained about celibacy, and I wasn't sure whether to raise the question. But in the first year we looked at the whole issue of sexuality. What is sexuality? What is your sexuality? What is healthy sexuality? Is it something to be suppressed?"

Have you had relationships with women?

"Yes, but they didn't become physical relationships. I felt that if I got married it would be a matter of respect to that person I married, that we explored sexuality together.

I'm 45 and I do have sexual longings. What do I do about it? I acknowledge them first of all. I don't pretend they're not there. I don't try and drive them away. I ask what my body is trying to tell me - my body is telling me I'm still a normal male. But there's a message from God as well. As a priest and a celibate some opportunities are cut off; but every path in life opens some road and closes others.

I don't have feelings of guilt about my sexual feelings. Sexuality is a gift from God; if we deny it we are denying something that God has given us. But to deny having them is to fool oneself, and that can be dangerous.

To be aware of these feelings doesn't mean to act on them. I would like celibacy to be an option. To be celibate is to be potentially available to all. It is a sign that we do not have to be obsessed with sex or sexual activity.

But to expect it of everybody - especially those who do not have the gift - is quite unfair."

XAVIER

How much self-doubt have you had - or still have - regarding celibacy?

"Leading up to ordination I had no self-doubt. I undertook wanting to be a priest and being a member of a religious order; I accepted the fact that celibacy was a part and parcel of that. I did that - not without question - but with full acceptance. I was 26.

Two or three years after ordination I started to seriously question whether this would really be possible as a lifetime commitment."

Was this because of your sexual urges?

"Yes. I tried to get advice from fellow priests as to what I should do about it. The people I went to took me seriously; it was never played down. I spoke to three priests over a period of five or six years and I

don't think any of them gave me great advice on how I might live with celibacy; more encouragement to accept the situation 'as it is'.

I was told: 'If you find yourself being caught in inappropriate behaviour, just accept that as being part of life ... and re-dedicate yourself'."

Did you find yourself in inappropriate situations?

"Yes, I did. I was going to a sauna - a place where it was easy to have casual sex. I never got in a situation where I was actually in a relationship with anybody. But I did find myself having casual sex. It went on pretty strongly for 20 years."

How did you get away from it in the end?

"I developed a couple of very good relationships - friendship relationships - so that when I found myself looking for intimacy, I could have that intimacy with a couple of really good friends.

Prior to that, my needs for intimacy were addressed as being purely physical. I didn't know what else to do, so I would go off and have sex. I got hooked on sex, and wanted more and more, even though I felt more and more guilty.

I am now 56 and celibacy is not a problem. I can live with it. I have a couple of friends - one male and one female - and I can discuss it with them."

Have you been chased by women because you were considered to be 'safe'?

"I have experienced that. I was working in a seminary, and not infrequently I came across women who got very attached to religious men of all ages. They were often women who had been hurt by men; they saw safety in male company that was not dangerous.

I would like to see celibacy relaxed; it should be optional. Celibacy for religious men and women is totally normal - if that's what they wish to do. But to make it obligatory is ridiculous."

JOHN (a Brother)

"Like priests we are bound by the rules of celibacy. I am 68 and there is always self-appraisal regarding celibacy. When I was 16 I went into a seminary where there was silence and prayers and I was told I had to be celibate. I was told very little about it, except it was a gift from God, and you were given the gift to use - to give your whole self to God.

There were no instructions about repressing feelings of sexuality. Even our parents told us nothing. Even as a kid in boarding school I had a wet dream. I tried to explain it to a priest and he said: 'Oh, it just happens'. But I felt guilty about my wet dreams. As though I'd done something wrong.

Being celibate made me feel a bit awkward with women. Because of our strict training I didn't see a woman for three years. I didn't need to see a doctor or a dentist and didn't leave the monastery. So I had no contact with women.

Nobody was doing anything for me in that regard at an important stage in my life. But when I was about 40 I met a woman and fell in love. We never had sex, we never went to bed. But she explained so much to me about the sex act - how women are attracted to men. She was a married woman in the middle of a divorce - she was lonely and I helped take her loneliness away."

Did you have guilty feelings about being sexually aroused when you were younger?

"Oh yes! But I didn't do much about it - I prayed a lot and went to confession. The priest just said it was part of growing up. I masturbated a lot and I confessed to that. I used to ring up a sex-line every three weeks and it cost me about \$35. I ejaculated after just a minute listening. I have never seen a woman naked; I have only seen bare breasts at the Missions.

I often wonder if I could perform the act of sex. Would I be able to have sexual intercourse? Would I come too quickly, because I get aroused quickly?

I have never had any feelings of attraction to fellow priests. I am not homosexual. I believe celibacy for priests should be optional - remain celibate unless you can't do without a woman.

We are kidding ourselves if we think priests don't have their mistresses - and that gay priests don't have gay boyfriends. I'm sure it happens. Priests go to brothels, but I have never been with a prostitute."

SEAN

Should celibacy should be retained for priests or relaxed?

"It should be an option for those priests living outside a community of priests. If you were a married priest living with three or four other priests it would be difficult.

I have been a priest for 18 years and - for me - celibacy is good.

It gives me plenty of time to deal with people who come to me for help; more time for my work. It also allows me an intimacy with Jesus in the sense that He is the only one I come to as my ultimate, intimate companion; rather than any non-divine person.

It isn't a big step psychologically. Since my childhood, Jesus has been a person to dialogue with, someone who is actually standing there. He is present with me in any place, at any time I go to Him."

How does celibacy compete with your sexual urges?

"Sometimes I have them, yes, but not very frequently; I have a low libido which is fortunate. I take this

as a grace from God that He has given me this along with the call to priesthood. Some priests express a struggle with it. But they also talk about a positive side which they find worthwhile. The struggle (with celibacy) never goes away; you get more experienced handling it."

***The names of the clergy have been changed at their request**

*Desmond Zwar is a journalist and author of 16 non-fiction books, including *The Loneliest Man in the World - the Story of Rudolf Hess's Imprisonment*.*

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