New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Solemn Vows*

One odd thing: in the debates before, at and since the recent Synod on the Family in Rome, nobody mentioned, let alone reflected on, the hundreds of thousands of monks, nuns and priests released from their vows over the last forty years. Little is ever made of this phenomenon, yet it surely contributed to loss of confidence in the sacredness of all vows, not excluding marriage.

For many Catholics, a pastoral practice of welcoming divorced and remarried Catholics to holy communion in any circumstances would amount to abandoning the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage. So many priests have been laicized, usually in order to marry, that some commentators might fear (or hope for) the collapse of the traditional commitment to celibacy, but the mainstream Catholic view would continue to honour the ideal, whatever the failures. As regards the industrial-scale dispensation from permanent vows in favour of so many men and woman in religious life, on the other hand, nobody would seriously claim that, for all its sad effects, the phenomenon threatens the continued existence of this life-long vocation.

Forty years ago, however, as older folk remember, a priest's being laicized was almost unheard of. This is merely anecdotal but I remember one who served as a chaplain during the War, never settled back into parish ministry, and eventually petitioned to return to the lay status. Permission was granted, requiring him nonetheless to remain celibate and to go on reciting the divine office. These obligations were regarded as non-negotiable. In 1956 he felt ready to return to the ministry: after predictable kerfuffle in Rome and a period of probation, which looked more like doing penance, his ordained status was reactivated, and subsequently he had many happy years as a priest.

Much more likely, of course, a priest who could no longer keep his vows simply disappeared. In effect, he was an apostate, sometimes shunned by former colleagues and even family members. Roy Hattersley, the Labour politician, born in 1932, writes in his autobiography that it was only as he sorted through old letters and papers after his father died that he discovered that his father was a Catholic priest, who left the Church to marry. Back then, even a smart young priest, as Hattersley's father apparently was, well versed in canon law and suchlike, probably never even considered petitioning for laicization.

In more recent times, the petition that a priest, monk or nun was required to complete tacitly assumed that the vows were never valid in the first place. Some at least regarded it as dishonest or even

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humiliating to declare that their vows were never really valid, that chastity was psychologically beyond them, and so on — whatever superiors, confessors and suchlike believed. For of course these vows were prepared for — still are — with vastly greater seriousness than the promises exchanged at a wedding usually are. As a would-be nun or monk you'd have spent at least one year as a novice; after prayer and thought you'd have asked to stay, and the abbot and his council, or the wise old nuns, after more prayer and thought, would have voted to accept you into the community, even then only for a limited period, such as three years. You might then be asked to go or choose to leave; more likely, however, you'd take solemn vows until death. If you were eventually dispensed by the appropriate church authorities from these permanent vows, you would be free to reconstruct your life in some other way.

Taking solemn vows in religious life was — is — much more dramatic than church weddings often seem. The young nun might be dressed as a bride; the promises that she would make on the gospel book would consecrate her forever to her spouse — Christ himself. This was — is — no mere metaphor. Indeed, for Catholics forty years ago, the solemn profession of a nun or monk felt a good deal more awesome than the exchange of vows at a wedding. It was not just that permanent vows in religious life had been prepared for so long, in contrast with a marriage that might take place a year or two after the couple fell in love, a relationship never discussed with a third party and with nobody to cast a vote in favour. Shocking as the breakdown of a Catholic marriage was back then, failure on the part of nuns, monks or priests to keep their vows was even worse. We could never have put it so bluntly but for a nun to be in a bridal covenant with Christ himself felt incomparably more sacred than being united indissolubly with the most decent man imaginable. That thousands of men and women have been released by the Church from this bond with Christ, surely invites reflection on how to deal with the survivors of failed marriages.

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