

## WARNINGS FROM A WIFE

MARY PEPPER

As the wife of an Anglican priest, and an Anglican myself it was with particular personal interest that I read Fr Adrian Hastings's article on celibacy (*New Blackfriars* March 1978), in which he described how he had come to the decision that he was free as a Catholic priest to marry. My understanding of the church and the priesthood coincides with that of most Roman Catholics, except that I have always had difficulty in understanding what it was about priesthood and marriage that made them incompatible. In spite of this, and in spite of my undoubted support for Fr Hastings's position, I want to draw attention to the *disadvantages* of a married priesthood. For me the practical and social side-effects are not theoretical but constitute part of my everyday experience. From this experience, and from my reflection on it for ten or more years, I have come to the conclusion that the clergy family plays a part in the 'domestication' of the church. By this I mean the tendency of the church to be a tame and cosy club shoring up the status quo rather than a prophetic and critical institution within society. I do not believe that having a married clergy *causes* the 'domestication' of the church; rather it upholds it and reinforces it. Thus, the erastianism of the Church of England, with its married clergy, is well known, but in the past all denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church, with its celibate clergy, have taken up a similar conservative stance, associating themselves with the powerful in a divided society.

I think many Roman Catholics and Anglicans would agree with me about two basic, damaging faults in both our churches. One is clericalism, undue emphasis on the status of the priesthood and a corresponding under-emphasis of the contribution of the laity to the life of the church. The other is unquestioning and uncritical conformity to the divisive, individualistic ideology prevalent in our society. It is difficult to discuss either of these things in isolation because they are so closely interwoven. Both tendencies are opposed to true democracy. They breed a dependent and passive laity within the church. I think it is possible to argue that the clericalist structure of the church is itself an articulation of the class structure of society. Fr Hastings feels that a married priesthood would make a stand against Roman centralisation and

'a particular kind of Latin clericalism', and against 'the grip within the church of men over women, of clergy over laity'. I can see that married priests might be less easily manipulated by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. I can see that it could potentially undermine the grip of clericalism if the priest's way of life is no longer so dramatically different from that of his married parishioners, if part of his mystique is dissolved. All the same, I believe that clericalism is so deep-rooted and resistant an infection that it will manifest itself just as strongly but in different ways. Changing from a celibate to a married priesthood only alters the expression of clericalism.

The nub of the issue is the role of the priest's wife. Roman Catholics, understandably, have very little awareness of this. In a clerically dominated church where there is a firm line drawn between clergy and laity she is in a peculiarly isolated position. She is one of the community to whom her husband ministers, and yet she is in a special relationship to him. She knows all the behind-the-scenes problems and successes. She may not be accepted by her fellow-parishioners because of her privileged position. However well they get on together she is always 'clergy by association'. This separation is accentuated in a traditional close-knit community where nearly everyone else has grown up together. Whatever the area, she is excluded from the lay camaraderie which comes from having experienced the successive ministry of a number of clergy. Priests may come and priests may go, but we go on for ever! One would imagine that the wife of the local doctor would experience a similar isolation, but it does not seem to be so. For one thing, the doctor's relationship to his patients is much more limited and specific. It does not flow over into the life of his family in the same way that the priest's obligation and availability to his parishioners affects his own family. The doctor's house is not a 'public building' in the same way as the priest's house. The other thing, of course, is that in general doctors do not live where they practise, especially if they have a practice in a working-class area.

The priest's wife is already confused about her role. She does not clearly belong either to the clergy or the laity. This confusion has been greatly increased in recent decades by the transformation in the position of women in society. In the past it was fairly clear what she had to do. She was to bring up the family, run the household and support her husband as far as possible in his ministry. Women today, however, want to be appreciated as individuals in their own right. This does not necessarily mean having a career outside the home. It does mean that many women will no longer accept that men, by virtue of their sex alone, can assume superiority and authority over women either in society in general or in their marriage. Within the church, however, in spite of all that may be said or written to the contrary, there still seems to be a general acceptance that there are two levels of Christian life. The higher

one supposedly is lived by priests and religious. It is almost as if the professional/amateur distinction common in other fields also applied to church membership! This being so, it is hard for a woman to accept that, while she and her husband are equally committed to the faith, his ordination has in other people's eyes, put him on a superior level to her, so that she is now 'merely one of the laity'. I feel that this is borne out when we see that out of the ninety women ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopalian Church in the United States thirty are married to priests. It would suggest that they are refusing to be kept on an allegedly inferior level of Christian life than their husbands just because they are women.

It seems to me that there is a threefold problem for the priest's wife. She cannot identify fully either with clergy or laity. Like the wives of all public figures the world defines her by reference to her husband. Finally, there is the tension between being an equal partner in the marriage and yet being popularly considered to belong to the lower rank of church members. There are basically two ways in which a clergy wife can respond to her situation. She may become a 'drop-out clergy wife' with a career, in advertising, let us say. Alternatively, she may be fully committed, licensed as a church-worker or lay-reader, and operating as part of a team with her husband. In reality most priests' wives respond in both ways, as far as child-rearing will allow. A common situation is for her to have a part-time job, but also to be busy organising the 'Young Wives' Club'. However, I want to separate the two types of response because I think each has a different, potentially harmful effect on the church, both at the local level and in its relationship to society in general.

It is a great temptation for priests' wives in this country to see themselves as partners in their husbands' work—as 'unpaid curates'. By thus attaching themselves to the professional ordained ministry they gain a definite sense of identity and they share their husbands' superior status. Within the parish, on the other hand, this formation of an inner clique must do great damage. We know that lay people are called to share in the ministry of the whole church with the priest, but when one lay person, the priest's wife, claims to be working with her husband as a special team all the others are bound to feel excluded, with no chance to share fully in the enterprise. Instead of the priest leading his people in a common task, by virtue of his ordination and his training in prayer and theology, there is a ruling family who hold power by virtue of their legal and social status. The result of the wife's identification with the clergy is the confirmation of the myth that the laity are the lesser members of the church.

The other response may sometimes seem daringly radical. Gone is the old image of the vicar's wife in flowery hat and sens-

ible shoes presiding over the Mothers' Union or playing the harmonium for the Sunday School like one of Barbara Pym's 'excellent women'. She asserts her independence from her husband's work, which she insists is a 'job' rather than a 'vocation' or 'ministry'. Doctors and teachers, she says, do not expect their wives to work for the practice or the school, so there is no reason why she should take her involvement for granted. She only goes to church because she chooses to. If she did not so choose there is no reason why she should not spend Sunday morning at the golf-club drinking gin. This response may seem normal and harmless enough, except that it carries with it the risk of identifying the priesthood with middle-class professionalism. As the wife sees herself as 'wife' rather than 'co-worker' she is bound to identify herself and her husband with other middle-class couples. It is most likely to be middle-class rather than working-class because of their level of education. They then become part of local bourgeois society, with its coffee mornings, local societies and clubs, including that worthy institution for professional men, the Rotary Club.

I think it is a failing among clergy of all denominations that some tend to see themselves as members of one of the professions. In a class divided society those priests who see themselves as professional men in the Rotary Club sense have chosen, whether they intended to or not, to separate themselves from any possibility of solidarity with the working-class. Again, while it cannot be said that marriage causes this separation, marriage serves to strengthen the integration of the clergy into the bourgeoisie.

One of Fr Hastings' arguments against a rule of celibacy is that it implies that marriage is at least one stage removed from the way of perfection. 'The religion of the incarnation is not a religion of withdrawal but a religion of holiness within the "flesh of humanity"'. The essence of the religion of Christ, as opposed to every form of gnostic or manichaeian religiosity, is so to love neighbour—wife, husband, workmates, lepers, the oppressed—that one is indeed loving God and finding God.' Christians are required to keep a balance between being in the world and loving it. and, on the other hand, ensuring that they are not wholly conformed to it. Fr Hastings says that the rule of celibacy leaves the priesthood insufficiently 'in the world'. The danger is that marriage of the clergy may not only change this, but swing things too far the other way. The conformity to the world that I mean has nothing to do with sex or with having a close relationship with one person, but with the ease with which a married priest fits into society and becomes less resistant to its ideological mechanisms. Celibates are manifestly non-conformist in our society—presumably in any society. The nuclear family, however, as an institution, plays a very important part in maintaining the status quo. It is a commonplace that subversive and rebellious young men and women will become

conformist and respectable when they marry and 'settle down'. Marxist feminist writers, such as Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham, have demonstrated how capitalism depends on the ideology of the family. What else is it except family responsibilities, mortgages and the pressures of high consumption, that keep the people who live around us here in Chelmsley Wood firmly fixed in their place on the Leyland Cars assembly line? Men and women look inward to the nuclear family instead of outwards to the local community and to solidarity with their fellows. Not only is the family with two children the ideal consumer unit in the commercial world, but it seems as if the churches too are out in the market after them as the ideal 'congregational unit'. When there is this stress on the family as the be-all and end-all, people without a family, the single, the childless, the widowed and the handicapped are bound to feel excluded and inadequate. It is not the marriage of the clergy that causes this stress on the family, but it does mean that the priest's family must keep a low profile. Unless he resists the temptation constantly to draw attention to them, letting himself be known as a 'family man' and so on, the cosy middle-class atmosphere will close in upon the local church. In such a situation, what chance is there of it being a body whose relationship to society is one of criticism and protest? By becoming thus conformed to the world it cannot take the part of the unrespectable and the oppressed, those from whom respectable families will recoil in distaste and disapproval.

I would be sorry if my arguments were used as ammunition in the fight to preserve a celibate priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. Like Fr Hastings, I believe that both celibacy and marriage are good and valuable, and that neither is incompatible with ordination. I have, I am sure, exaggerated the corrupting influence of clergy wives and families, but I am also sure that my picture is not a totally false one. I do not think that the abolition of enforced clerical celibacy would seriously threaten clericalism in the church or change the relationship of the church to society. All that I find fault with the church here is caused by the two root evils—clericalism in the church and class division in society. The existence of clergy wives and families only draws attention to these things, or at worst, intensifies what is already there.