

The Myth About Celibacy

One of the myths mentioned in the video, *A Time to Protect God's Children*[™], deals with the issue of celibacy. The myth is that “priests abuse children because of their priestly vow of celibacy.” In response, Dr. Barbara Bonner points out that most people who abuse children never took a vow of celibacy and that the few priests who abuse children do so for the same reasons that other child molesters commit abuse—not because they promised to live a celibate lifestyle.

Some people struggle with this issue. It seems there are two primary reasons that this is difficult for people to assimilate. First, many people don't understand the vow or promise of celibacy. Second, a lot of people think that priests *become* child molesters rather than recognizing that the reverse can be true—in some cases, child molesters become priests.

This is no different than the fact that, in some instances, child molesters become teachers, coaches, bus drivers, babysitters, camp counselors, business owners, etc. Plainly stated, there is no “career path” to becoming a child molester. By comparison, some child molesters become parents. Some child molesters *become* neighbors, friends, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. Yet, none of these distinctions *causes* someone to become a child molester. Conversely, the fact that someone is a parent doesn't preclude that individual from being a child molester. Career and other social labels have no scientific bearing on someone's sexual choices.

“Celibacy”

People rarely think about “celibacy” except in the context of discussions about marriage and the priesthood or their own sexual activity. For example, single, widowed, or divorced adults may refer to the term as a way of acknowledging periods of time when they are not involved in sexual activity. When people say “I have been celibate for 6 months,” they are referring to the length of time they have abstained from having sex.

Celibacy, however, is defined as “the state of non-marriage” and/or “sexual abstinence.” According to the Church, “celibacy is the renunciation of marriage implicitly or explicitly made, for the more perfect observation of chastity, by all those who receive the Sacrament of Orders in any of the higher grades.” However, “celibacy” and living a celibate lifestyle are not easily defined, understood, or sustained. In fact, “celibacy” is not even an accurate representation of the commitment made by clerics and religious who promise to live a life of “single-minded devotion to God and service to the ministry.”

A more accurate description of the vow or promise made by priests and religious is one of “celibate chastity.”

Every Christian is called to live a life of chastity. Chastity is a gift of God's grace and a choice. It calls each of us to live in a way that is consistent with our promise to treat others with dignity and to prevent us from using others as sexual objects. Married people practice chastity by staying true to their marriage vows. Single people practice chastity by restraining their sexual desires, thoughts, and actions.

Celibate chastity calls one to live a life of love that is rooted in spiritual practices. The practice and discipline of celibate chastity is intended to foster a commitment to the fulfillment of God's Kingdom on earth by dedication to ministry and a choice not to be “coupled.”

Without finding ways to love another in the absence of sexual involvement, there is no celibate chastity. Selfishness and self-involvement or self-promotion are incompatible with a life of celibate chastity. Those who choose this lifestyle must also learn to create and maintain relationships that are often challenged by change and the “demands of ministry.”

Living a life of celibacy or celibate chastity has nothing to do with molesting children. Living such a life is a powerful commitment to forgo sexual gratification in the pursuit of God's mission on earth. Lifting the ban on celibacy or relieving the cleric or religious from that

obligation would not protect children from molesters. Allowing married clergy would not prevent child molesters from seeking out and abusing children. In fact, priests and religious *living true to their vow or promise of celibate chastity* would prevent any future problems of sexual abuse among that population.

Child molesters become priests

The decision, after discernment, prayer, and study, to choose ordination to the priesthood is not made lightly. Ordination to the priesthood is the fulfillment of God's call to the ministry for the man who makes that journey.

Ordination to the priesthood is not a pathway to child molesting—it is the consecration of men “to be the sacred ministers for the worship of God and for the sanctification of all people...” Through ordination, God's special grace is passed on to those charged with carrying on the message of Christ in the world.

There are some priests who have abused the trust and power that is bestowed in ordination by abusing children. The priesthood did not cause anyone to become a child molester. However, the priesthood provided an unfettered access to children—and child molesters seek out positions that give them access to children.

It is easy to see why child molesters might seek out the priesthood. The ordained priesthood was an opening for unsupervised, virtually continuous access to vulnerable children. Other professions offer access too. Childcare workers, coaches, teachers, and many other professions have provided child molesters with open-door access to children. That doesn't mean that every teacher or coach is a child molester. A few chose the priesthood as their avenue through which they could gain access to children. A few. Yet, those few have garnered enormous media attention and their individual behaviors have come to inaccurately raise questions about others in the priesthood.

The priesthood does not cause people to become child molesters, but it is easy to see how some child molesters might seek out the priesthood as a means of fulfilling their own sexual needs and desires. In the past there were very few screening tools available to assure that someone seeking ordination was in the proper mental and emotional state for the priesthood. Today there are many, very good screening and assessment tools in place to measure an applicant's suitability to attend seminary. The Church wants to be certain that those who seek the ministry are genuinely answering God's call to the priesthood and religious life.

Celibacy is not the problem. The priesthood is not the problem. Child molesters are the problem. They look for opportunities to get access to children and, just as with any profession that works with children, the priesthood was vulnerable to infiltration by those whose purpose was, ultimately, to secure children for purposes of sexual gratification.

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