

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

How do complicated depictions of priests, love, and sex in the media reflect the changing official Roman Catholic attitudes toward priestly celibacy, and why is this significant?

The Case

The popular British television show *Fleabag* contains a plotline in its second season which highlights the issue of clerical celibacy. The titular character Fleabag meets an attractive young priest named only as Priest. They form a friendly relationship which develops, with the priest initially rebuking her advances due to his celibacy vow but the two have sex and develop feelings for one another. Priest however chooses his career and walks away from their potential relationship, choosing his faith over her. This case illustrates the complications that can arise for many priests - wanting to explore desires and behaviours that are considered “normal” for many other people. More than simply sexual desires, priests can both want and develop romantic attachments with people that they are unable to explore due to their occupation, undoubtedly leading to emotional turmoil and in some cases, seeing priests retiring in order to be able to pursue relationships and marry. Priest being young and attractive is significant too as we typically think of priests as elderly and removed from general society, limiting their proximity to sex and romantic relationships, when in actuality, the age of priests has a wide range, and the mantle of celibacy can be taken up by Catholic priests young and old alike.

The Context

The first written attempt at enforcing priestly celibacy dates to AD 304, as presented by the Council of Elvira; this was then further enforced in AD 325 by the Council of Nicea. It was however in the 12th century that the Church definitively took a stance on clerical celibacy, passing the rule that banned priests from marrying, going on to reaffirm it at the Council of

Trent in 1563, which is where the Roman Catholic church as we know it today derives its position from.

Why be celibate?

Reasons for celibacy within the Catholic church can be seen within Bible scripture: ‘The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.’ (1 Corinthians 7:32-40). It suggests that celibacy allows men to better focus on their devotion to God, as there are no other relationships they hold higher and their attention will not be diverted elsewhere – ‘a person is freed completely of earthly ties and his life is directed entirely to God as its immediate end.’ (Auer, 1967, p.304). There is a strength that lies in celibacy, and this is arguably reflected even in the media depictions of priests that break their vows. In *Fleabag*, Priest chooses his faith over love, suggesting that for many priests their faith really does take priority. This is seen too in *Derry Girls*, where a priest who initially leaves the parish to pursue a woman returns to help within the Catholic school the show is centred around. It is suggested that this removal of romantic distraction ‘makes a priest more available to his people’ (Hoban, 1989, p.197), not only in that the parish is his priority, but also in that he can manifest more clearly the life and truth of Christ (Auer, 1967, p.304). Key also is the upholding of tradition. Celibate priests within the Catholic church are what is considered necessary for sacramental duties - to change these traditions sets a potentially dangerous precedent of others being reformed or done away with. Catholic priests hold a function – ‘in other words, [they] can be considered “Man” rather than merely men.’ (Sered, 1999, p. 209). Priests lose their individuality and agency due to the role and expectations placed upon them. Bem’s lenses of gender are useful to consider here also, specifically androcentrism. Presenting women as a distraction for men from their faith – it suggests not only that men are the only ones with morals strong enough to uphold celibacy, but also that

Gabriella Johnson

they are the only ones who can form such a close relationship with God, which in itself reinforces patriarchal ideals.

Complications of Clerical Celibacy

According to the Statistical Yearbook of the Church, the number of priests has declined for the first time in a decade, going from 414,969 in 2016 to 414,582 in 2017 (Glatz, NCR, 2019), though the number of Catholics continued to be steady. This presents the Catholic Church with the very immediate issue of not having enough priests for every parish around the world. The average age of priests is rising too, with resignations being more frequent among young priests ‘who found loneliness a personal problem’ (Schoenherr, Yamane, 2002, p.21) and who would like the opportunity to marry. The trope of young priests straying from celibacy – or at least desiring to – rings true then. The television show *The Thorn Birds* is another example, with a priest succumbing to his desires and having sex with the woman he loves, resulting in her becoming pregnant with his son. This occurrence is not entirely uncommon outside the world of fiction, with a Washington Post article published in May 2019 exploring the aftermath for women who have relationships with priests that result in children. The turmoil this causes is clear, with an affected woman saying she felt emotionally abused by the priest who pressured her to stay silent to protect his career. It is clear the negative aspects of celibacy not only effect priests, but vulnerable people around them.

The Case for Change

An argument for optional celibacy can perhaps be posited. We have seen that while our fictional priests stray, they all choose to return to the faith. It is arguable that if priests were given the opportunity to explore their desires without risk that they would voluntarily return to their vocation, possessing real-world knowledge and a reinforced dedication to their parish.

It's suggested that 'insistence on celibacy over marriage creates an artificial, useless barrier between priest and people.' (Schoenherr, Yamane, 2002, p.140). While perhaps necessary to retain this barrier to illustrate a certain power bestowed to the priest, it also means there is a large aspect of human life that priests are removed from, meaning their advice on relationship issues and marriage could be flawed. The decision presented to the priests in our media examples – of choosing between love and their career – is one that causes great inner turmoil. While sensationalised, it is true that the vocation presents a lonely and difficult path. Olden's anecdotal account of his religious training reveals there was little in ways of interpersonal relationships (2008, p.14), and how to interact with those who come to them. This creates a vulnerability in priests, which could be said to make the risk of resignation higher – they are not prepared to deal with the complications and emotions that can arise when close bonds are formed with those they help. Having close personal relationships outside of the church could in fact be beneficial for priests, providing them with more nuance and insight in their duties, as well as providing positive impact on their daily lives and mental health. A case for reformation presents itself then, and it is one we are possibly witnessing the beginnings of currently, following the Amazon synod. A final document has been approved that calls for the ordination of married men as priests in the region, in response to the 'enormous difficulties' communities have in the Amazon accessing the Eucharist, with many going months without seeing a priest, and also considering women for diaconal ordination. If numbers of priests continue to decline within the Roman Catholic church, these ideas may spread across the religious community, not only providing priests with freedom and opportunity for families and relationships, but also expanding the roles for women within the church.

Glossary

Androcentrism - A tendency towards male bias in institutions or a tendency to disregard the female contribution to society and culture.

Celibacy - The state of abstaining from marriage and sexual relations.

Council of Elvira - A Spanish Council held early in the 4th cent.

Council of Nicea - The first ecumenical council of the Christian Church, held in 325.

Council of Trent – Nineteenth ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, held in Trent, Italy.

Eucharist - The Christian service, ceremony, or sacrament commemorating the Last Supper, in which bread and wine are consecrated and consumed.

Parish – (in the Christian Church) a small administrative district typically having its own church and a priest or pastor.

Patriarchal - Relating to or denoting a system of society or government controlled by men.

Reformation - The action or process of reforming an institution or practice.

Synod - An assembly of the clergy and sometimes also the laity in a diocese or other division of a particular Church.

Bibliography

Auer, A. (1967). The Meaning of Celibacy. *The Furrow*, 18(6), p. 299-321. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/27659428 (Accessed 8 December 2019).

→ A comprehensive look at celibacy, considering both biblical and traditional reasons for it being upheld. It considers the relation of marriage within the argument, and concludes with a suggestion of optional celibacy, though the author is careful to ensure authority is laid with the Vatican and supports their decision to uphold tradition. The arguments against celibacy are also supplied, meaning it is not too biased a text.

Derry Girls (2019). Channel Four, 5th March.

Fleabag. (2019). BBC One, 4th March – 8th April.

Glatz, Carol. (2019). ‘Number of priests declined for first time in decade, Vatican says’, *National Catholic Reporter*, 6 March [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/number-priests-declined-first-time-decade-vatican-says> (Accessed 6 December 2019).

→ A short article detailing the statistics released in a statement from the Vatican press office from the Statistical Yearbook of the Church, which reported on worldwide figures as of December 2017. A useful article that present the facts with no bias.

Hoban, B. (1989). Priesthood at Risk: The Celibacy Factor. *The Furrow*, 40(4), p. 195-203. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/27661497 (Accessed 8 December 2019).

→ This author considers celibacy within the priesthood and how it could be leading to a decline in the church. He is not disparaging of celibacy, instead considering the ways it can be made more of a positive experience and acknowledging the need for priestly intimacy and personal relationships. A useful article as it presents an insider's view of the topic, making it a fair assessment.

Iati, Marisa. (2019). 'Catholic scandals prompt some women who had relationships with priests to ponder whether they, too, were abused', *The Washington Post*, 12 May [Online]. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/catholic-scandals-prompt-some-women-who-had-relationships-with-priests-to-ponder-whether-they-too-were-abused/2019/05/12/fac917e8-5ba9-11e9-a00e-050dc7b82693_story.html (Accessed 6 December 2019).

→ Interviews with women who had secret romantic relationships with priests. A useful look at how the strict rules of the church can have the most negative impact on those they are trying to teach. Perhaps negatively biased in its presentation of the church.

Ibáñez, Daniel. (2019). 'Amazon synod document calls for married priests and increased role for women', *Catholic News Agency*, 26 October [Online]. Available at: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/amazon-synod-document-calls-for-married-priests-and-increased-roll-for-women-20862> (Accessed 7 December 2019).

→ A brief news article outlining the events of the Amazon synod, providing quotes directly from the conference. Very useful as a concise and straightforward outline of what was proposed and what could be happening next.

Olden, M. (2008). Priesthood in Changing Times. *The Furrow*, 59(1), p. 12-25. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/27665667 (Accessed 7 December 2019).

→ A personal and informative journal article about Olden's training to become a priest, unbiasedly presenting how it both benefited and was somewhat detrimental to him. He acknowledges the separation there can be between priest and parish and considers how the Church itself needs to reform to address this. It provides a deep insight into life for a priest, and unashamedly reflects on the negatives associated with priesthood, whilst remaining respectful and factual in its writing.

Schoenherr, R.A., and Yamane, D. (2002). *Goodbye Father: The Celibate Male Priesthood and the Future of the Catholic Church*. New York: Oxford University Press.

→ This book contains comprehensive statistics and studies on clerical celibacy, presenting a case for compulsory celibacy to combat the decline of priest recruitment. The argument is clear and effective, though perhaps heretic to traditional Catholics. They write without bias and provide a useful compilation of facts and figures with an optimistic outlook for the future.

The Thorn Birds. (1983). ABC, 27th – 30th March.