

In defense of celibacy: An act of total self-giving

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

Every day the newspaper brings fresh evidence of the crisis in the Catholic Church, a crisis with implications far-reaching enough to be of concern to all Christians.

The headlines of newspaper editorials and opinion columns have been garish: “Let Us Prey,” “Father Knows Worst” and the like. In a column with the headline “Church getting just deserts,” *Newsday*’s Sheryl McCarthy says, “My first reaction to the murder of a Long Island Catholic priest and a worshiper during mass this week was that perhaps this was a case of poetic justice.” Unfortunately it’s not always easy to tell news reports from op-ed pieces. An April 8 *Newsweek* report on the pope’s role in the current crisis sermonized, “As American Catholics wrestled with an appalling priest scandal, they looked to Pope John Paul II for leadership, but saw only an ailing 81-year-old man who seemed not to grasp the depth of their anguish,” and concluded, “If the pope was the CEO of a major corporation he probably would have been handed his golden parachute years ago.”

The irony is that though we’ve lost our taste for pastors who thunder at their congregations, decrying the sinfulness of a generation gone astray, we seem to find it invigorating to thunder at our pastors and church leaders, calling to the mat not only the criminals among them but an ever-widening circle of suspects and collaborators, enablers and bystanders, as if *they* were the generation that has gone astray.

Of course it was high time, well past high time, to bring shameful things into the open, to put the shameless out of commission and the innocent out of harm’s way. There needs to be a complete shakedown of the system that allowed serial child molesters to be transferred from parish to parish. But there’s something very wrong with the glee taken in the exercise, the “I told you so” parades, the sweeping predictions about the future of the Catholic priesthood, and the superficial news analyses that remark with mild surprise on the ordinary faithful who are *still* Catholic

despite the church.

The problem isn't so much anti-Catholic prejudice as lack of comprehension of what it means to be an ecclesial Christian. An article in the April 8 *New York Times* predicts that "one likely outcome" of the crisis is that "a rising number of American Catholics will separate their religious faith from the institution that is supposed to nurture it." But this misses the point. The church is bigger than the sum total of its individual members, bigger than the community they share and bigger than the structures they inhabit. It is neither a club nor a corporation. No ecclesial Christian would consider separating his or her religious faith from the communion to which he or she belongs. This was the lesson we learned in the Donatist crisis, when Augustine likened the church to a vast net in the ocean of the world, scooping together both the bad and the good, which are not to be separated until the net is drawn to the shore.

Priestly celibacy is one issue where ecclesial tone deafness has been the order of the day. Granted, Richard McBrien may be right when he says, "Obligatory celibacy is dead; it's just a matter of time." If so, one can only hope that this will be the result of profound deliberation rather than a panicked reaction; one can only hope that there will be a sound historical and spiritual rationale behind such a drastic change.

According to a widely circulated misreading of history, priestly celibacy was invented by the medieval church as a way of lining Rome's coffers—there would be no legitimate offspring entitled to inherit church property. On the contrary, sacerdotal celibacy is a deeply rooted ideal of the ancient church. Nor is it unique to Christianity. From the priest of Isis to the Hindu *sadhu* to the Oxford don, celibacy has been judged supremely valuable by many cultures. In Theravada Buddhist lands, the celibate monk exists in symbiotic relationship with the noncelibate householder, thereby creating the ecclesial community known as the *samgha*. To drop the discipline of celibacy would be to disrupt the delicate ecosystem that the *samgha* represents.

The ecclesial community we call church is an ecosystem like the Buddhist *samgha*. For the Roman Catholic Church, which Andrew Greeley has likened to a rain forest, priestly celibacy has been an integral part of the ecosystem. And in the current cultural climate, once celibacy becomes optional there is more than a little possibility that it will become extinct.

When a rare species is threatened with extinction, do we write it off because the odds seem against its survival? Do we urge it not to hang on like a silly dodo, but to bow gracefully off the evolutionary stage? On the contrary, we do whatever it takes to repair its habitat. But where are the environmentalists of the church? All Christians have an interest in seeing this habitat flourish in its rich rain forest-like diversity; moreover, it has been a particular specialty of the Catholic Church to conserve practices that are culturally unfashionable against the day when they will once again be understood.

In the name of all hope for Christian unity-in-diversity, it's time to let the good priests know that their efforts and sacrifices are not in vain, and that their celibacy (whether or not it becomes optional) is valued as an act of total self-giving and as a radiant proclamation of the kingdom of heaven, in service to the priesthood of all believers.