

PÉTER TÖRÖK

## IS CELIBACY THE SECRET OF GOOD MENTAL HEALTH?

**ANDREW M. GREELEY (2004) *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P) ix, 156 pp., 23 cm, ISBN 0-226-30644-5, \$12.00.**

Greeley, a Catholic priest and a ‘sociologist with the sharpest tongue’, as the *New York Times* characterised him about four decades ago, remained faithful to himself. In *Priests*, he analyses the background of a delicate religious subject, and during the analysis his tongue proves to be not only sharp, but double-edged.

The apropos of this short, but superbly written book consisting of nine chapters and a useful appendix is a very sensitive issue: the scandal of paedophile American priests that erupted in 2002. Greeley’s focus in the introduction, however, is not on the transgressions of paedophile priests. One edge of his sharp tongue criticises the hierarchy’s unfortunate approach to and handling of the situation, the other condemns the media and the experts – some of them former priests – featured by the media, for misrepresenting the issue.<sup>1</sup> According to the scenario described by them, the Second Vatican Council destroyed faith. Its measures let homosexuals infiltrate the church, resulting in the abuse crisis. There was, however, another scapegoat: celibacy. The solution recommended by these specialists looked simple: ‘get rid of celibacy or get rid of the gays, and the abuse will stop’ (p.10).

Contrasting this one-sided view, Greeley draws the readers’ attention to a tradition of research providing a more nuanced and rather different picture on Catholic priests in the United States. This research began in the late 1960s by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), and extended to the 1993 *Los Angeles Times* study of priesthood. The sensation-mongering media coverage of the ‘year of the pedophile’, as Greeley refers to the sexual abuse crisis in 2002, inspired him to replicate the 1993 survey with some questions on the sexual orientation and practise of Catholic priests.

The advantages of repeating the 1993 *Times* survey in 2002 included (a) the possibility of measuring the impact, if any, of the crisis on priests, (b) an opportunity for some measures over time of the condition of the priesthood in the United States, and finally, (c) it was ‘the first time that a national sample of priests have been asked directly about their sexual behavior’ (p.38). The major disadvantage was that, although the response rate was satisfactory for the *Los Angeles Times*, it was not what NORC would have considered appropriate. Reflecting on the low response rate, Greeley remarked dryly and laconically that one must work with what one has (p.37n).

<sup>1</sup> The media’s partiality can be best seen in the fact that similar misconducts of the clerics in other religious entities were barely mentioned. For such cases, see e.g. SISKIND (2001).

The second chapter of the book describes the priests' sexual orientation and behaviour and concludes that '72% of American priests are heterosexual celibates, 10% are homosexual celibates, and 18% are not celibate, two-thirds of them heterosexuals and one-third homosexuals. If one considers only those who reject celibacy and remain priests, one discovers that they are 3.2% of the population of priests, half homosexual, half heterosexual' (p.40). The findings also reveal that the respondents found homosexual subcultures in the Catholic dioceses and seminaries. Therefore, Greeley notes that 'one must also consider the possibility that a priesthood with a higher proportion of homosexuals might provide a haven for child abusers. While most homosexuals are not abusers and most abusers are not homosexuals, the propensity of Catholic conservatives to claim that child abuse is essentially a homosexual problem must be considered. ... Since many abuses were committed by men who were ordained long before homosexuality became visible in the seminaries and the dioceses, the argument that there is a link between the increased presence of homosexuals and child abuse seems inherently improbable' (pp.45-46).

As concerns the other scapegoat for sexual child abuse, celibacy, Greeley's findings are surprising indeed, especially from the point of view of mental health. In Chapter 3 he raises the question of what impact celibate life has on the happiness of those who practise it, or at least try to live up to it. Does it create major psychological problems? 'Is it possible that [Catholic priests] sublimate the basic human propensities for sexual union and for parenthood without paying a heavy emotional price' (p.48)? The answer, according to Greeley's nuanced and detailed analysis, is a definite 'yes'. Consider first the issue of intimacy, defined as a 'basic human need that includes close, non-sexual bonds with personal friends' (p.46). The results demonstrate that most Catholic priests are content with the quality of their intimacy, heterosexuals more than homosexuals, and older men more than middle-aged priests. Another issue is satisfaction with their job and life situation. The findings indicate that Roman Catholic priests are more satisfied with them than mainline and Conservative Protestant ministers. The fact must also be taken into account that the satisfaction level of Protestant ministers with their family life is lower than the average of the population in the United States. Finally, 'willingness to choose the same career again or satisfaction with the choice is higher for priests than for doctors, lawyers, and faculty members. Their satisfaction is in general higher than that of Protestant clergy. ... Homosexuals are less enthusiastic. But except for those between forty-six and fifty-five, the majority are firmly committed to their priestly vocation' (p.52). All in all, celibacy is not an obstacle to the job and spiritual satisfaction of the Catholic clergy. What is more, celibate Catholic priests look to be the happiest men.

Chapters 5-9 deal with the relationship of Catholic priests and the laity, and with hierarchy, summarise the findings, and highlight some political implications. Greeley emphasises that his recommendations are his own reflections on the data and do not always flow logically from them. These chapters are thought-provoking, especially for concerned Catholics, but from the point of view of mental hygiene, Chapter 4 deserves special attention.

Chapter 4 examines the reasons why Catholic priests leave the priesthood. In the light of findings previously reported, celibacy as the main (let alone only) explanation does not seem plausible. It is true that most priests want celibacy made optional, but it is also true that a majority of them do not intend to live with that possibility. Other researchers have found that, by the time of the silver jubilee of ordination, the rate of resignation of Catholic priests is about 25%. While this is a significant loss, this rate is nevertheless somewhat lower than the divorce rate for married Catholics in the United States. In other words, there must be other factors leading to resignation. According to Greeley's analysis, 'to produce high levels of resignation there must be a combination of dissatisfaction [with the work] and a desire to marry. If only one is present, dissatisfaction is a higher predictor of the propensity to leave than a desire to marry' (p.65).

Thus, we can also see that celibacy (especially in itself) is not the secret of good mental health and happiness, as the title might imply. It is rather that a satisfaction with the priestly work makes celibacy valuable for Catholic priests, at least in the United States. We may ask whether the situation is similar in Europe, the allegedly most secular corner of the world. How do priests evaluate their situation in a secular environment, especially in the former socialist countries after several decades of religious persecution? In the Appendix, Greeley provides the questionnaire he used for his 2002 survey. Thus, his book is a source not only of valuable information, but also of inspiration.

#### Reference

- SISKIND, A. (2001) 'Child-Rearing Issues in Totalist Groups' in B. ZABLOCKI & T. ROBBINS, eds., *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field* (Toronto, Buffalo & London: U of Toronto P) 415–51.