**Letters to The Tablet**

18 April 2019

**Sadness of Fleabag**
Dawn Foster was right to point out in her column (6 April) the questionable behaviour of the priest at the point of Fleabag’s soulful sharing of her past. Surely, however, the greater story is both the main characters’ search for love, which is played out in the context of the compulsory celibacy of the priesthood. The sadness of the ending is their parting after declaring their love for each other. The story reflects the pain caused by the persistent elevation of celibacy above mutually loving sexual expression so eloquently expressed by Daniel O’Leary in his last contribution to your columns before his death (“Coming home too soon”, 2 February). The legacy of St Augustine (“… He did invite me to a more perfect way”, Confessions: Book 8, Ch. 1) still weighs heavily. So many young admirers of Fleabag will wonder why they weren’t able to stay together.

**Jim Sikorski**
London SE26

25 April 2019

**Episcopal ostriches**
Elena Curti reports the dire straits of pastoral planning in Archbishop Malcolm McMahon’s Liverpool (“The listening archbishop”, 13 April). One likely statistic for 2045 is 50 priests for 140 parishes – unless, that is, “we try to find new ways”. The beginning of this, we read, is the pilot scheme of employing “professionals” to take the lead in place of priests.

Yes, the professionals can manage the business and social side of things – and perhaps should have been doing so decades ago – but what about meeting the objectives for which parishes were established: keeping alive “the memory of me”?

The failure of hierarchy (and here we may excuse the hard-pressed parish clergy) to bring the issues forward and consult church members about the collapse of the Church’s ministry immediately stirs up our memories of their cover-up of long-standing sexual abuse.

In the case of priesthood, is their underlying problem an inability to think outside the sacerdotal square? The last time the Church was in chaos a monk stepped out of the square declaring: “It is the ministry of the Word that makes the priest and the bishop.”

That was 1520. His idea caught on. In 2020 could we, perhaps, begin to rearrange our Church 500 years after Luther pointed a new old way for us to go? A bonus is that women can talk too.

**(Dr) John N. Collins**
Seaford, Victoria, Australia

Elena Curti’s interview with Archbishop McMahon illustrated the ostrich mentality of the hierarchy. Many bishops are as “genial” as he although I hope not all would sit through an interview with folded arms. No doubt they would be just as evasive.

Consider his response to questions about the ordination of women: “work to be done”, and a response worthy of a politician: “We have enough clerics.” On Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics “discussion is not complete”. On clerical abuse and cover-ups his response is for the Church to “go out to the poor”.

It is certainly a fact that “he cannot do anything outside the parameters of church teaching”. However, if, as he suggests, people “have to be heard”, then perhaps the hierarchy could remove their heads from the sand.

**Bernard Tucker**
Old Alresford, Hampshire

02 May 2019

**Hugo’s insight on love**
I was half way through The Hunchback of Notre-Dame when the tragic fire occurred. What struck me most was not Victor Hugo’s descriptions of the building, but his account of the Archdeacon’s reflections on his doomed love for the 16-year-old Esmeralda: “... he recognised the fact that this malevolence was nothing but vitiated love; that love, that source of every virtue in man, turned to horrible things in the heart of a priest, and that a man constituted like himself, in making himself a priest, made himself a demon.”

**(Dr) Anne Jewell**
Gloucester

09 May 2019

**Topic of the week: Shame and pride of a priest and father**

I absorbed your editorial “When fathers become dads” (4 May) with a flood of very mixed emotions. Some years ago, as a youngish curate working in an English diocesan parish, I fell in love with a very attractive young woman.

Though fraught with all the practical difficulties one might expect, our love affair lasted for about 10 years. About four years into our relationship, as might be expected, but certainly unplanned, she became pregnant and gave birth to our son. He is now an adult, and though we never married, and I continue to work as a diocesan priest, we both, his mother (now my dear friend) and I, have a great relationship with him.

At the time of this pregnancy, I sought discreet advice, from a very senior priest, about how my diocese might handle the matter if, still wishing to stay in the priesthood and also entertaining grave doubts about the possibility of a happy and stable future relationship with our child’s mother, I were to throw myself on their mercy.

The advice I received was startling, sobering, and, as far as this relationship was concerned, utterly inappropriate. I would be asked to sever all contact with mother and child and the diocese would take over and assume responsibility for the financial support of both mother and child.

Having decided to try to do it my way, I chose to stay in as close contact as my parochial responsibilities would allow. I was present for the birth of our son, and made sure that every modicum of financial support that I could muster was securely in place.

An again unplanned consequence of not abandoning them, and staying as close as I was able to be with them, was that a second child, our daughter, was conceived and born. She too is now an adult, the mother of two children herself, and I love her and her children to bits.

To my lasting shame (on bad days) and with a sense of swelling pride (on good days), I continue living and working as a priest, and my friend, and former lover, their mother, continues in her chosen and very successful professional career.

From both sides, such arrangements can never be free from hurt, sadness, regrets and devastating loneliness, and, now that it is far too late, I will never know whether things would have been better or worse had different decisions been made.

Even though I am now rapidly approaching full-time retirement I still have to act and speak discreetly. I will never regret, however, having loved, being a father, a grandfather and a still fair-to middling secular priest.

NAME AND ADDRESS SUPPLIED

16 May 2019

**Topic of the week: When a priest falls in love**

The letter headed “Shame and pride of a priest and father” (11 May) was a sad reflection on the reality, for many, of the continuing insistence on celibacy for Catholic priests. This is just another example of the hypocrisy and duplicity that pervade so much of the Church’s behaviour.

An interesting contrast to this priest’s evaluation of his life might have been the reflections of the woman and children involved. Can denial, dishonesty and secrecy nurture and sustain commitments?

I too fell in love with a priest. Making  a choice between ministry and marriage was painful and difficult for both of us. Forty years later, we are still together. We, along with many others, decided that living our love openly was the healthier and, indeed, gospel option; your correspondent followed a different path. It did not need to be this way, for either of us.

**Ann Burke**
Sheffield

The priest who wrote so movingly about being a “secret” father reminded me of the recent series of Fleabag, though in a different tenor. The priest there is malfunctioning, with an obvious drink problem and is conflicted about both his celibacy and love for a woman, which he cannot handle.

It was offensive in part, but it would be wrong to claim that real Catholic priests would never act like that. Many would not, but some could in their breaking down. His homily in the final episode was a cry of honest pain as was his choice to walk away.

Coming back to the calmer tone of your correspondent, it may be understandable to need to separate from a relationship sometimes, but you can never abandon a child. It is devastatingly cruel all round. Yes, this raises questions about compulsory celibacy but even more so about reputation and image. Love, mercy, forgiveness give the best reputation possible.

**(Fr) Kevin O’Donnell**
Crawley, West Sussex

Vatican II demolished the rational and theological case for requiring compulsory celibacy for priests. Priests in that situation can either resign from the clergy and enter a legal marriage or continue with priestly ministry, discreetly pursue a loving relationship with a woman, and enjoy a circumscribed kind of family life.

The advice from the church authorities, as described by the writer, was simply inhuman. The Vatican bureaucrats have not yet come to terms with Vatican II.

**Michael M. Winter**
London N19

This is the most heartening letter I have ever read in The Tablet and I congratulate you for publishing it.

This admission from one man is the tip of the iceberg. Vincent Doyle, who comes from Galway, has formed a global group to support all children of priests. Coping International has 50,000 users, which might indicate the scale of the issue.

It is sad that the Vatican’s guidelines to bishops on how to deal with priests who have become dads are not made public.

**(Fr) Tom Grufferty**
Portsmouth

I’m all for abandoning the celibacy rule, but that’s not how it is yet. People are remarkably free in their forgiveness of most sins, but hypocrisy is an exception. This man seems to have gotten away with having his cake and eating it too. Perhaps in retirement he could “come out” and campaign for married priests.

**Margaret Callinan**
Balwyn, Victoria, Australia

*[MMaC submitted this response to the 16 May letters, but The Tablet did not publish it:*

*Over many months the Tablet has published letters reflecting on the question of priesthood and its association with compulsory celibacy. Maybe now the pain evident in the most recently published letters will receive a positive response from our Bishops who have not faced up to the reality that is staring them in the face. Who, on behalf of the Hierarchy, will have the decency to contribute to this correspondence in a compassionate and caring tone?*

*One man, two vocations, is both reasonable and long overdue. Our advocacy on behalf of acceptance of married clergy has been our concern over many years. All to no avail. One bishop recently asked for an opinion said it was 'a matter above his pay grade'. Pastors of the flock? I don’t think so.*

*The courage of those who have experienced such a lack of charity is to be admired. The ignoring of the central issue is to be deplored.*

*Chris McDonnell                                        Mike Kerrigan*

*Secretary                                                   Chair*

*Movement for Married Clergy]*

30 May 2019

**Topic of the Week: Priestly life could include marriage**

Unlike Mgr Paul Grogan (“The Priestly Life”, 18 May) I am not a great fan of priestly celibacy. I would take exception to any argument that having a wife and children would somehow take from one’s availability to minister as a priest. This suggests that the celibate priest is more available and generous in service of Our Lord and therefore a bit superior to all the married lay folk that try to serve the same Lord. It smacks of clericalism.

I was a missionary priest for 29 years. I found the work fulfilling. Like Mgr Grogan I always wanted to find ways to be a better minister and priest; but I always wanted the intimate friendship and love of a wife. But this was not allowed. I could never understand why priests could not marry. I am now married for 20 years with two children.

When I left the priesthood (not the Church!), I resolved to try to continue to be a priest in my work even if I am not allowed to preside at Mass and other sacraments. I worked with isolated rural men; I run workshops and facilitate different groups; like Mgr Grogan, I do a lot of listening to vulnerable people as a counsellor or spiritual director; I volunteer and work with a number of groups with a Christian focus at diocesan, parish and local level. I help and love my wife and children and I would have time to preside at Eucharist or other sacraments if I was asked. My heart is not divided. Where is the conflict?
**Noel Bradley**
Buncrana, County Donegal, Ireland

St Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis all praise the UN declaration on human rights. How is church law on clerical celibacy consonant with article 16 of the declaration? It says: “Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family.”

It is right for the Church to encourage voluntary clerical celibacy in accord with the gospel ideal. But is it morally right to deprive by law a whole class of people of this human right?
**Edwin Rankin**
Bolton

I read Fr Anthony Cho’s account of his priestly life (25 May) with a smile until I got to the last paragraph where he tells us he regards parishioners as his children. How depressing that a priest whose account of his life has so much to commend it infantilises his people in this way. In an effort to be treated as baptised adults, equal to priests, perhaps it’s time to stop using “Father” as a form of address.
**Catherine Brady**
Loughborough, Leicestershire