



Statement on Clerical Celibacy

by Thomas Merton

The majority of Merton's writings were published originally in the United States. He did write one essay, "Christian Humanism," especially for publication in JORNAL DO BRASIL. He reworked it and it was published in English in SPIRITUAL LIFE at about the same time it appeared in Brazil. Another essay, "Statement on Clerical Celibacy," written in April 1967, was first published in Portuguese in Brazil and has not been widely circulated in English. He sent a copy to Sr. Emmanuel who responded immediately and Merton wrote to her in May 1967: "Glad you like the statement on celibacy. . . By all means if someone wants to print it in Brazil, go ahead." She went ahead and "Thomas Merton e celibato" appeared in VOZES in July. We reprint it here as Merton wrote it in English, a statement as timely today as it was when he typed it in 1967.

-The Editor.



I am happy to accept the invitation to become an Advisor of the National Association for Pastoral Renewal in order to help study and solve the critical problem of a married secular clergy. This problem must be faced, though many would prefer to ignore it in the hope that it might just go away. There is no hope of it "going away". It will become more and more urgent from day to day and I think everyone realizes more or less that it involves the future of the Church in the modern world. That is why some find it so frightening: they are still not ready to admit that drastic change in many fields is required if the Church is to continue her mission successfully. Theologically there are no serious reasons why secular priests should not marry. The first Pope was a married man. St. Paul assumes that Bishops will be married. The discipline of the medieval Church required a celibate clerical caste. It can be argued that in the modern world such a caste is a liability rather than an asset. This does not mean that celibacy and chastity would cease to exist. But the charism of religious chastity would be for monks and members of religious institutes, and for those of the secular clergy who wished freely to remain celibate. However, the problem of a married clergy has very deep psychological implications for Catholics at large, married, clerical or religious. The very identity of "The Catholic" seems to be called into question. The notion that priests must be celibate forms part and parcel of a general attitude toward man, the flesh and the world. It implies a down-grading of worldly life, a suspicion of marriage and the flesh, and suggests that the perfect Christian life is that of virgins. This leads to the division of Christians into two classes: those who take their faith most seriously and are consequently celibate, and "second class Christians" who have to marry but who make up for it by trying to maintain some vestiges of a monastic spirituality even in lay life, and bringing up one or two children for the priesthood or the cloister. This idea of Christianity prevailed for centuries and doubtless worked well within the framework of a hierarchical society which has, however, ceased to exist. It is now seriously called into question by theologians who cannot be ignored. But the old attitude persists and remains very strong even in those who believe themselves progressive. Hence, rapid and drastic change is not to be expected, and unless the issue is frankly studied in depth, there will be a lot of unnecessary anguish and emotional upheaval. Though I myself as a monk am dedicated to the solitary and contemplative ideal, and have no intention whatsoever of getting married in my old age, I feel deeply involved in this question which affects so many of my fellow priests and has such profound implications for the self-understanding of all Catholics today.

