

*CELIBACY: THE CASE AGAINST*

iberating  
Lesbian Nuns

By Mary Hunt

Illustrations by Brian Williams

SISTER JOAN is a member of a canonical community. She lives with Sister Barbara, a member of another congregation. They both work as advocates for poor people in the rural South. They are lovers. Neither plans to leave her community. Both hope that no one will find out about their life together.

Sister Marcia is a member of a progressive religious community that supports her work among people with AIDS. Her lover, Sister Anne, is a doctor. Their community is pleased that they live together since rents in their neighborhood are high. They discuss the contradiction between their public vows and their private conduct, but neither is inclined to leave the community. Their close



friends know about their life-style, but so far no one has brought it to the attention of community leaders. Besides, several of the leaders appear to live in coupled relationships themselves. And the community keeps a running tab at the local women's bookstore.

Sister Susan just broke up with her lover, Kate, a married woman with five children. The relationship had come as a shock to both of them. Work at the local school, where Susan is the principal and Kate the president of the PTA, had spilled over into long evenings. Kate's husband traveled constantly; he was glad she had such a good companion in Susan. And Susan lived alone, so her sisters were glad she had some companionship, too. It was a first for both of them. But, in time, though both were deeply in love, neither could handle the intensity. After all, a nun and a married woman are hardly likely to be lovers—or so it seems.

These stories, composites based on real people, illustrate how compulsory celibacy limits the lives of mature women in religious communities—every time a “particular friendship” is broken up, every time a woman is forbidden to develop a sexual relationship as the price of membership, every time women refuse to touch one another for fear of being misunderstood. Such denials are an intolerably high price to pay for maintaining women's canonical communities.

**R**ELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES, variously called convents or religious orders, and their members, known as sisters or nuns, are an essential part of the Roman Catholic Church. In the United States there are about 100,000 sisters, half as many as 20 years ago. At their peak, communities such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Sisters of Mercy had scores of women in their training or formation programs all over the country. Now, such groups are lucky to have three or four. The median age for members is about 60, a sure sign that the

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end of religious communities as we have known them is near.

Women become nuns for a variety of reasons, all of which are subsumed under the term “having a vocation,” that is, a calling to live in community with other women under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In recent years poverty has meant economic sharing rather than impoverishment. Obedience has come to mean communal accountability for decisions on work and living arrangements. But the meaning of chastity has not changed much.

Some women joined religious communities because the work or mission of the group attracted them. Others joined for the access to education and upward mobility that the orders provided. And still others, I would judge the majority, joined for seemingly inexplicable reasons.

When pressed, women often acknowledge the influence of a nun who was a beloved teacher, mentor, or role model and who was living a life-style that looked appealing. Usually that life-style stood in stark contrast to one's mother's in that it included no biological children, no husband, and plenty of self-directed activity. But the vows, especially celibacy, were part of the package as well.

It is no wonder that these groups of religious women seem to have a higher percentage of lesbians among them than in the population at large (though until recent years such matters were unspoken). Nor is it any wonder that compulsory celibacy, commonly assumed to

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mean abstaining from heterosexual contact, was not a remarkable burden in the past.

**C**LASSIC FEMINIST theory now includes Adrienne Rich's powerful essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Rich argues that the existence of lesbians is obscured by the fact that heterosexuality is the norm in a patriarchal culture. Until this norm is transformed, she argues, the lives of lesbian women will remain hidden, and the variety of lesbian experiences will be lost. Rich suggests that there is a "lesbian continuum," a way of talking about all women's potential and actual ways of loving women. While the lesbian continuum has generated great debate, the basic argument, that compulsory heterosexuality is a constitutive part of patriarchy and that all women fall somewhere on the continuum, is increasingly well accepted.

Rich is correct that compulsory heterosexuality has a negative impact on all women, especially lesbians. An equally compelling case can be made for the negative impact of compulsory celibacy, even in the freely chosen situation of canonical communities. Compulsory celibacy is the antidote to the fear of what will happen to women who are self- and community-identified without dependence on men. It robs women of choice by circumscribing their possibilities. Without compulsory celibacy, differences between women would diminish and choices would increase. In the church, the artificial, male-constructed barrier between so-called lay women and so-called nun women would fall away. Likewise, society as a whole would be forced to abandon celibacy as the calling card for the "good woman" (symbolized by the Virgin Mary who was not only celibate but had a child—a difficult, if not impossible, act for any woman to follow).

Those who have asked why celibacy is "a given" and what religious communities would look like without it have been given nebulous

answers. Many who leave communities because of compulsory celibacy think they have outgrown it rather than that it is unreasonable to begin with. If a woman wants to be a part of a religious community she must still accept this discipline. Amen.

Heterosexual women have been raising questions about compulsory celibacy since the mid-1960s when many decided to leave the church because of it. But lesbian women *within* religious communities open the possibility of a viable option to celibacy within the community without making other substantive changes—such as becoming co-ed, or allowing members who are married or have children.

A lesbian nun has the possibility of living in an emotional/sexual relationship with a

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woman who may or may not be part of the community—an option that is exercised every day. The challenge to the church comes when people start to acknowledge this situation publicly. Then the compulsory nature of celibacy becomes obvious and conflictual.

**T**HE PSYCHOLOGICAL effects of compulsory celibacy are difficult to assess. The prohibitions on loving in an integrated way, which compulsory celibacy invokes, make it extremely difficult for friendships to flourish. It is not that all friendships must include sexual expression. Rather, when sexual expression is denied, a friendship cannot move through the natural cycle of increased intimacy which of-

\* Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs*, 5, No. 4, (1980), pp. 631-60.

ten includes some consideration or exploration of sexual dynamics.\*

Religious communities, for all of their emphasis on community, produce some very lonely people when celibacy is enforced. Conversely, some of the healthiest people in the communities, those most involved in leadership and innovative ministries, have deep friendships that include sexual expression.

At stake with compulsory celibacy is something even more insidious than a prohibition on sex for nuns. It is the loss of choice over love and life-style that translates finally into a loss of autonomy. Like Benedetta Carlini and Bartolomea Crivelli, two nuns who had a spectacular romance during the 17th century, today's nuns have no choice but to accept

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celibacy if they wish to live in canonically connected communities. This requirement creates a serious conflict because those same communities are women's spaces that have been created to nurture and enhance women's relationships with one another.

An easy solution would be to say that women should not join these communities in the first place. But, in fact, few organized women's groups have succeeded like religious communities in providing economic sharing, meaningful work, and joint strategizing for social change. To lose the accumulated property, the women's traditions, and the sisterhood of centuries to a patriarchal church seems too high a price to pay. Yet, to maintain these benefits at the expense of choice for individual women is dearer still.

\* See my forthcoming *Fierce Tenderness: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row), 1989, for a fuller treatment of women's friendships.

**T**HEOLOGICALLY, COMPULSORY celibacy for women is on shaky ground, especially when it comes to lesbians. The definition of celibacy, based on the Latin *coelebs*, meaning bachelor, is clearly founded on male experience, especially that of male sexuality. A man can cause pregnancy, thus his sexual capacity has to be controlled. Since inheritance laws would have permitted a priest's offspring to receive the land and goods of the parish, celibacy was prescribed for priests. Gradually a theological rationale was embellished to promote the "tradition." It is important to realize, however, that material considerations preceded this logic.

Sexual expression between women presents no such specter of pregnancy. To the contrary, sex between women does not require contraception nor threaten the need for an abortion. Thus the fundamental reason for celibacy, based on the false norm of male experience, is undercut.

It is also argued that celibacy is a tradition, that canonical communities have always required it. Without detailing the history of celibacy, it is important to reiterate that this tradition, even if true, is again based on male experience. Several contemporary writers have attempted to distinguish between celibacy for priests and chastity for members of religious communities. Some have tried to develop a notion of the "sexual celibate." No contemporary theological writer seems to face the real issue, namely that compulsory celibacy is an ecclesiastical discipline, not a matter of divine revelation. As such it can be changed if those in power would relinquish their hold.

Compulsory celibacy is used to keep a certain decorum, an order that lesbian nuns, by their very existence, defy. It is not their alleged sexual activity that is the main problem. What is at stake is the challenge that they present to the whole church about the importance of well-integrated and freely chosen sexuality.

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Lesbian nuns who define celibacy for themselves in terms that do not preclude sexual activity, or those who simply consider their public vow invalid because of its patriarchal definition, are left with many contradictions. They run the real risk of being forced, usually by other women and sometimes by their own guilt, to leave their religious families. They may be branded unfaithful or lacking in integrity insofar as their private interpretations of the vows are concerned. And worse, they may be prevented from being open to the serendipitous experience of love that comes when one least expects it.

Heterosexual nuns experience the same veiling as it were, but contemporary lesbian/gay movements, coupled with the women's movement, have given lesbian nuns a newfound boldness. Ironically, while doubly oppressed when compared with their heterosexual counterparts, lesbian nuns seem to be challenging structures that, if changed, will improve the lot for heterosexual women as well.

**W**OMEN IN canonical communities may charge me with insulting or degrading them by pressing the point that celibacy is compulsory—as if they have been robbed of choice. After all, they assent to their vows. I mean to affirm their choice to be with women in religiously focused communities. But there is no intrinsic reason for celibacy to be a part of that commitment unless the control of women is taken for granted. Moreover, if women were to develop communities free from patriarchal expectations, it is not clear that celibacy would

figure in at all. My sense is that as women understand compulsory celibacy, it will disappear, even though some will choose to live celibate for reasons of their own.

It takes time to free ourselves and our imaginations from the shackles of patriarchy, but it can be done. The language of mystery has shrouded many discussions of celibacy. I do not pretend to understand totally what motivates a small number of people to choose celibacy unfettered by connection to a canonical religious community, but I do know that whenever such language abounds there is something dubious to explore.

What makes one person love another is equally mysterious. But "celibacy for the kingdom" is not mysterious. It is a rationale used to mask who is king and what power the kings exercise. Celibate love is raised to a higher level in an exercise in body hating, woman controlling, or both. Such is not the stuff of mystery but of oppression. A free choice for celibacy among members of religious communities would be possible *only* if membership were not conditioned by it. Until then, not even members of canonical communities can claim celibacy voluntarily.

Celibacy is not usually a lifelong choice for people outside of canonical communities. Most people have occasional celibate periods, even if they are married. With the serious health threat of AIDS, some people are choosing celibacy as a way to limit their risks. But in general, celibacy is not something to which most people aspire. Above all, it should not be confused with a sexual preference; celibacy is a choice one makes within the context of sexual preference. It is accepted or chosen for a brief period, rarely celebrated, and cheapened when forced.

As sexually active lesbians in canonical religious communities become increasingly vocal about their experiences, we will have new insights for understanding the impact of compulsory celibacy. For now, women who are sexually active in religious life commonly react by leaving. Canonical communities, fear-

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ing that their relationships with the Vatican may be in jeopardy if such activities become known, often set ultimatums and subtly encourage women to live out their sexual explorations, both homosexual and heterosexual, beyond the limits of the community.

The first step is usually exclaustation, a period of time away from the community. Then an indulgence of secularization, popularly known as leaving the community, can follow. The language alone is enough to give a clear message. Secular and not canonically connected people are sexually active; religious life and sexual activity are mutually exclusive.

**I** SUGGEST THREE preliminary steps toward overcoming compulsory celibacy as we recognize and celebrate the legacy of lesbian nuns and thus honor the dignity of all women.

First, I urge that canonical religious communities sever their ties with the Vatican. I realize this is a radical suggestion, but I consider it *sine qua non* for women's autonomy. The control exercised to maintain compulsory celibacy is the same control that prevents women's ordination and that presumes to dictate women's reproductive choices. Until women and women's experience on their own terms are part of the decision making, the canonical connection is simply a noose.

Second, knowing that the severing of the canonical cord may not happen soon, I urge women in religious communities to develop a trusting context in which frank discussion of women's experiences of love and sex can take place. This might necessitate declaring a mora-

torium, such as a month during which all such discussions would be considered totally off the record. Only when the terror of telling is broken down can we really call each other sister. Then perhaps the poignancy of love well lived, love lost, of love simply waiting to be shared will be part of what moves the hearts and minds of people in power.

Third, I urge that communities begin to talk about and celebrate their own lesbian heritage. It is important to use the word lesbian to break down the taboo. Again, I realize the radical nature of my suggestion, but I make it as a way of underscoring how deeply ingrained the problem is. We must go to the root of the problem, and dare to speak the unspeakable before we can honor the real memories of our sisters, not the whitewashed, glossed-over images of them that we need in order to keep the whole system from collapsing.

Eventually, compulsory celibacy and all of the repressive apparatus that surrounds it will collapse under its own dead weight. Then healthy, loving, freely chosen relationships can flourish for women who choose to bond in communities. It is to these relationships that women bring our communal and religious best, and it will be because of them that society will move more quickly to a new social order. ▼

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