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Steve Lopez:
Points West

A Priest's Confession: 'Celibacy Is the Toughest Thing'

He left home at 12 for an all-boys boarding school, went straight into the seminary after that, and was ordained a Roman Catholic priest at 23.

"I never went to a dance, never went on a date, never had any real understanding of the opposite sex," says Father X.

In perfect irony, this man who had missed his adolescent years became an advisor to teens. He was youth minister at his Orange County church, and when he was 32, he molested a girl named Reda, who was less than half his age. "At that stage of life, 30-plus, I went through my emotional adolescence," he says, now in his mid-50s.

If he had offered the self-analysis as an excuse, I wouldn't have given him the time of day. But he meant to explain that becoming a priest required a denial that he was a sexual being.

The lie left him confused, malformed, and, for a time, dangerous. He wasn't a pedophile, he claims. Just a normal male strangled by a tight collar.

"I think celibacy is the toughest thing in the priesthood," Father X told me in a typically candid moment. "I love being a priest. But I don't like being a celibate."

Father X and I talked several times by phone in connection with a recent scandal involving an Orange County monsignor who sexually abused several boys. The day I finally met him, he was even more candid. He believed God had forgiven him for what went on with Reda but said he hadn't forgiven himself.

"I'd like to think I'm a good guy, and I'm clinging to my sense of self-

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worth," he said. "I'd like to stand before my creator and say there was no malice in me." There is no question in his mind, Father X said, that the unnatural suppression of sexual desire among priests explains some of the sex abuse cases that have scandalized the church. Celibacy ought to be an option, not a requirement, he said, especially given the shortage of priests in the United States.

"Some of my friends have left the priesthood on these issues," says Father X.

I knew of an alleged relationship Father X had with an adult woman. When I asked about it, he surprised me.

"There were several relationships," he said. "Four serious ones."

He called one that took place in the mid-'80s "the big one," and said it lasted several years.

You had four relationships? I asked.

He nodded.

Four sexual relationships?

"I'm going to take the 5th Amendment on that."

Two of the four did not know the depth of his feelings, he said. He admits to having been in love more than once. In the case of "the big one," he had to finally decide between the woman and the priesthood.

"I have realized how hurtful it is to me and to others to have to end relationships like that. Oh yes. I hurt people."

Then why be a priest? Why not get married and serve the church some other way?

"I think it's the most meaningful thing I can do. I have a thousand opportunities to do things that sometimes can change someone's life for the better."

The relationships are behind him now, he claims. He says he is "absolutely committed" to celibacy.

I left the church that day with mixed feelings about Father X. With clear eyes and the wisdom of experience, he gets at the heart of church hypocrisy on the priesthood and sexuality. But he is part of the problem, too.

"If you're a celibate priest and then you end up having affairs with one, two, three, four women, what are you saying?" asks **Redacted**

former priest who writes about the church. "That it's OK to use these women in order to stabilize your sexuality?"

Sipe has heard all the rationalizations.

"I do good deeds, therefore I can use these women, I can use these kids, I can use the man, whatever the case may be. It's the kind of thinking that destroys the credibility of the religion."

Heterosexual and homosexual relations run from the top down in the church, says Sipe. But it's never addressed because the church teaches there can be no sexual thoughts, desires or actions outside of marriage.

"You have bishops involved in homosexual relationships," says ~~redact~~ e. "If you can't talk about it, then how can you deal with it?"

Quietly tolerating sexual activity is no different than condoning it, ~~Redact~~ says. But he has one more explanation for the Vatican's silence on sex in the church.

"There is a system of blackmail, and the reason abusers often don't get touched is because they frequently have something on the higher-ups."

In my talks with Father X, the subject of forgiveness came up more than once. The church is about forgiving sins, he had said.

"The church is about reform, too," said Sipe. "We're all for love and good deeds and forgiveness. But if a system is perpetuating exploitation, then its need is for reform. Not forgiveness."



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