

Why insist on celibacy?

Documentary shines a new light on Catholic priests' obligatory abstinence.

By NANCY RAMSEY
Special to The Times

Several years ago, when sexual abuse by some priests in the Catholic Church began making headlines, filmmaker Antony Thomas started asking questions — actually one in particular — that he felt no one was addressing sufficiently: Why does the church insist on celibacy among its clergy?

He put that question to priests and young men about to become priests, a neurobiologist, a neuroscientist, a sex therapist and an ex-priest turned psychologist (A.W. Richard Sipe, author of "Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited").

The result is "Celibacy," a documentary premiering tonight on HBO that pulls no punches in assessing what Thomas alleges is a crucial yet unexplored crisis in the Catholic Church. Thomas previously took on the Saudi royal family in his documentary "Death of a Princess" (1980), the horrors of colonialism in his native South Africa in "Rhodes: The Race for Africa" (1998) and the Christian right in America in "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done" (1988).

In making "Celibacy," he visited the Sinai desert, where, at a Christian monastery 1,800 years ago, sex was condemned, even within marriage; the monks believed God demanded total abstinence. He visited India, where in a celibate monastic community adolescent boys are awakened at 4 a.m. for prayer, worship and rigorous physical exercise, in the belief that young men are often prey to wet dreams at that hour.

And Thomas visited San Fernando in the Philippines to film Catholic worshippers who flog themselves every Good Friday in commemoration of Christ's suffering and crucifixion.

"Pain not only displaces sexual desire, easing the burden of celibacy, it can also open the gateway to ecstatic visionary experiences," Thomas said.

But it is on the mainstream Catholic Church and its position on enforced celibacy among its priests that Thomas focuses most of his attention.

"It's when it becomes compulsory that they get into such a mess," said Thomas, who was raised in the Anglican Church. "All kinds of strange rationalizations go on. I remember talking to one of the psychiatrists who said a priest told him, 'I have

anally penetrated 15 boys but I'm still celibate.' Can you imagine the tangles the mind gets into to excuse that?"

Among the priests Thomas interviews is the Rev. Doug Dandurand, who has been a priest for 23 years. In the film, Dandurand, who has a warm and open manner, says that he knows priests who use pornography and some who have secret relationships on the side, whether heterosexual or homosexual. "The one I don't know," he concludes, "is that true celibate."

"When something comes from the interior life, it's met with passion and purpose and fulfillment," said Dandurand, speaking by phone from his home in Minneapolis. "When something is imposed, some part of our being is shut down. I think the media missed this piece."

Dandurand recently completed a doctoral dissertation on the implications for men of mandated celibacy. When news reports surfaced of priests abusing children, he said, "the media objectified them. They were rubber-stamped 'abusers.' But what got them there?"

In response to Thomas' gentle probing, Dandurand admits to a certain loneliness in being a priest, as much as he loves his profession. As people are leaving a service, "I turn around and I see this huge empty church. That empty church is really symbolic of the emptiness I feel inside."

Ralph Pinto was a priest and Linda Pinto a nun when they fell in love almost 30 years ago. Fellow priests suggested to Ralph at the time that he have an affair with Linda — "Work it out of your system" — and move on, as they recount in the film. "If Ralph had strayed with a young man or a young boy, he's allowed to remain a priest," says Linda. "The real mistake Ralph made was falling in love with a woman."

"That the church should have no way of keeping people like the Pintos is so tragic," Thomas said.

Thomas' film has, not surprisingly, met with strong criticism from within the Catholic Church. Reviewing the film for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, David DiCerto, of the conference's office for film and broadcasting, wrote that it presents the church's moral teachings regarding human sexuality "in a largely unbalanced way. . . . While trotting out the hoary chestnuts about the church's thinking that sex is, at best, a necessary evil, it ignores anything positive in Catholic theology about sexuality, including the fact that it is an essential element in the sacrament of matrimony."

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"Man is more than just a ball of biological urges," said DiCerto, speaking by phone. "Viewed apart from the mystery of committing yourself to Christ, [the celibacy requirement] could seem unreasonable. . . . [But] the spiritual motive is imitating Christ, committing yourself to the entire flock. Priests are seen as shepherds. Not taking the spiritual aspect of the commitment of celibacy into account is where I think the film's shortcomings are."

Thomas is not alone among filmmakers who are taking on various aspects of the church's teachings and hierarchy. Barbara Rick recently completed a documentary called "In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith," about a nun who founded a ministry for gay and lesbian Catholics. The church, Rick said, teaches "love thy neighbor as thyself, but not if they're gay. The church from on high is saying that gay people can't be in a loving relationship or in a partnership."

"In Good Conscience" is making the rounds of the film festival circuit and receiving standing ovations.

"Sister Rose's Passion," by Oren Jacoby, is also striking a chord on that circuit; it recently won the award for best short documentary at New York's Tribeca Film Festival. Rather than confront issues of sexuality, the film addresses the church's historical anti-Semitism, charges of which resurfaced earlier this year in connection with Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." Sister Rose Thering is, said Jacoby, "a woman of real conscience. . . . At a time when some people are willing to use religion for political purposes, Sister Rose is sincere. She's 83 and she's been fighting for better Christian-Jewish relations her whole life. People relate to her."

As did Antony Thomas to the people he met, many of whom declined to be interviewed on camera. He said that because of this connection with his subjects, he's left with one more question: "Why are they in this position?"

'Celibacy'

Where: HBO

When: Premieres at 10 tonight.

Rating: TV-MA (may be unsuitable for children under the age of 17).