

# God's Gift to His Bride

## Priestly Celibacy

**Issue:** What is priestly celibacy? Does priestly celibacy have a biblical and historical basis? Is this an unchangeable doctrine or a discipline that can and should be modified? What are some objections to mandatory priestly celibacy?

**Response:** Celibacy is the choice to remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom of God. Celibacy is a vocation, a gift from God freely accepted and a sacrifice freely undertaken by those responding to His call to the consecrated life. As a discipline, celibacy serves to conform the priest better to Christ. The Latin Church has a venerable tradition of requiring her priests to be celibate. This discipline dates back to Jesus Christ and the apostles in an unbroken line, and became a universal practice by the fourth century.

In addition to the claim that it is “unbiblical,” objections to mandatory priestly celibacy include complaints that the discipline is not imposed on all Catholic priests, that celibate men are inclined toward inappropriate sexual behavior, and that mandatory celibacy is a factor in the vocation shortage.

**Discussion:** While required for priests in the Latin rite as a discipline, celibacy is understood by the Universal Church as a gift given by God to those who would conform

themselves more perfectly to Christ. Accordingly, this truth is expressed both in the Code of Canon Law, which pertains to the Latin rite, and in the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Code of Canon Law says in canon 277:

Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven, and are therefore bound to celibacy. Celibacy is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can more easily remain close to Christ with an undivided heart, and can dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and their neighbor.

Similarly, Catechism (no. 1579) provides:

All the ordained ministers of the Latin Church, with the exception of permanent deacons, are normally chosen from among men of faith who live a celibate life and who intend to remain *celibate* “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to “the affairs of the Lord,” they give themselves entirely to God and to men. Celibacy is a sign of this new life to the service of which the Church’s minister is consecrated; accepted with a joyous heart celibacy radiantly proclaims the Reign of God (original emphasis, citations omitted).

More fundamental than the Code of Canon Law and the Catechism, however, are the documents of Vatican II. In particular, the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterium Ordinis)* gives the their willingness to be dedicated with undivided loyalty to the task entrusted to them, namely that of espousing the faithful to one husband and presenting them as a chaste virgin to Christ. They recall that mystical marriage, established by God and destined to be fully revealed in the future, by which the Church holds Christ as her only spouse. Moreover they are made a living sign of that world to come, already present through faith and charity, a world in which the children of the resurrection shall neither be married nor take wives (no. 16, footnotes omitted).

### Espousing the Church

Of course, in her discussion of celibacy, the Church is specifically referring to the free renunciation of marital intercourse for the sake of the kingdom. Sexual activity outside of the marital state is immoral and inappropriate for everyone, and not simply for priests and religious (cf. Catechism, nos. 2396, 2400).

Indeed, all are called to the virtue of chastity, to fully integrate their sexuality within themselves according to their states in life—whether single, married, or consecrated (cf. Catechism, nos. 2337, 2348-2350). In *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (March 25, 1992), Pope John Paul II presents celibacy as harmonious with the virtue of chastity, which he there describes as “human sexuality lived as a genuine sign of and precious service to the love of communion and gift of self to others” (no. 29). He says that even though priests are not married, they give their bodies to Christ and his Church in a way that still has a “nuptial meaning”:

The Church, as the spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and spouse loved her. Priestly celibacy, then,

is the gift of self in and with Christ to His Church and expresses the priest’s service to the Church in and with the Lord (ibid., original emphasis).

### Eunuchs for the Kingdom

By His own example, Jesus calls men to enter into single-hearted service to God. Jesus Christ, the eternal high priest, did not marry. His celibacy shows that perfect participation in His priesthood includes living “as eunuchs” for the kingdom of God and He exhorted His disciples to do the same: “[T]here are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 19:12). We know that Jesus is here referring to celibacy as part of His well-known discourse on the indissolubility of marriage. He has just condemned divorce and remarriage as a form of adultery. In response to the disciples’ observation that in such case “it is not expedient to marry,” Christ proposes voluntary celibacy “for the kingdom of heaven.” As *Presbyterium Ordinis* teaches, “for the kingdom of heaven” means dedication to furthering God’s kingdom here on earth, and, regarding celibacy, living as a sign of the fullness of the kingdom when “[they will] neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Lk. 20:35).

As an apostle, St. Paul was a celibate bishop and encouraged others to live the same way (cf. 1 Cor. 7:7-8; cf. 7:39). In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he explained that this call to “single-heartedness” poses some problems to those who are married. Those who remain unmarried can, as a rule, devote more of their lives to service to the Lord. “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, . . . but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, . . . and his interests are divided” (1 Cor. 7:32-34). In order to serve in the most Christ-like and fruitful manner, the Church calls her priests to follow Jesus’ example and remain in an unmarried, chaste state.

While in Scripture Christ and St. Paul clearly teach the good of celibacy, some people object that the Church violates Scripture by *requir-*

*ing* celibacy for priests. They often have in mind 1 Timothy 4:1-3, in which St. Paul warns against those who forbid marriage. In fact, those who had forbidden marriage were the Gnostics, who did not live by faith as good ministers of Christ (cf. 1 Tim. 4:6). Others have in mind 1 Timothy 3:2, in which St. Paul teaches that a bishop must be “the husband of one wife.” In spite of St. Paul’s support of celibacy in 1 Corinthians, some people believe from this verse that a bishop must be married. However, St. Paul is not outlawing marriage, but is safeguarding the episcopacy and the particular Churches against rumors and calumnies that often go with remarriage. To put it bluntly, the “husband of one wife” is not the husband of two wives. Further, the Church—the foremost advocate and defender of marriage since the time of Christ—does not forbid marriage. Rather, a man freely chooses celibacy in response to God’s call.

### Tradition Not Silent

In addition to the Scriptures, writings of early Christians give evidence of the Church’s unbroken tradition of celibacy. For example, Tertullian, writing circa 200 A.D., said that heretics can have many of the outward signs of faithfulness, including celibacy.<sup>1</sup>

By the fourth century, celibacy had become the unwritten law or custom for the Church. In the fourth century, a regional council in Elvira, Spain (306) forbade married men to be ordained. By circa 375 A.D., St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, was caused to observe that

a call to the holy priesthood of God . . . is not approved for those who, after a first marriage, and their wife having died, enter upon a second marriage. . . . But even one who is husband of one wife, if she is still living and still bearing children, is not approved.”<sup>2</sup>

Observing this tradition and encouraging a wider practice of celibacy, at the regional council of

Carthage in 419, Bishop Aurelius delivered these words:

When at the past council the matter on continency and chastity was considered, those three grades, which by a sort of bond are joined to chastity by their consecration, to wit bishops, presbyters, and deacons, so it seemed that it was becoming that the sacred rulers and priests of God as well as the Levites, or those who served at the divine sacraments, should be continent altogether, by which they would be able with singleness of heart to ask what they sought from the Lord: so that what the apostles taught and antiquity kept, that we might also keep.<sup>3</sup>

Other regional councils thereafter made celibacy a mandatory discipline. One exception is the Council of Trullo in 692, at which bishops in the East formally adopted a policy allowing married clergy. The Council of Trullo thus departed from the general tradition of celibacy expressed at the Council of Carthage and recognized by the Church in general. Thus, the Council of Trullo originated the now widespread practice in the Eastern Churches of ordaining married men. Later, the First Lateran Council (1123) made celibacy the norm for all priests, deacons, and monks of the Church, and the Second Lateran Council (1139) made attempted marriages invalid for clerics. Since that time the norm has been upheld, most notably at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and the Council of Trent in 1563.

### Exceptions to the Rule

The Catholic Church is one Church with a number of rites and particular Churches (cf. Catechism, nos. 832-835). Celibacy is the norm for men seeking ordination in the Latin rite of the Church, the largest rite in the Church. While most rites in the Church licitly allow for the ordination of married men, the Church has consistently and universally advocated celibacy since the time of Christ. Priests ordained in the

Latin rite freely choose celibacy and thus are bound to their vow or promise, though they may be dispensed from their vow or promise in exceptional circumstances.

While celibacy is the norm, the Latin Church sometimes makes exceptions for married Protestant clergy to become priests. As Protestants, these ministers took part in accepted practices within their former ecclesial communities. Once they became convinced of the Catholic faith, they desired to enter into full communion with the Church. Because the discipline of celibacy is just that, a discipline, and not an unchangeable teaching revealed by Christ, the Church can dispense from the discipline for good reason. The Church accommodates such men because they have a ministerial vocation and, in part, because retraining for some other career could impose a severe hardship on them and their families. Popes Pius XII and John XXIII were the first to make provisions for some clerical converts to the Latin rite<sup>3/4</sup>such as former Episcopalian priests<sup>3/4</sup>to continue in their ministry, even if they are married. Pope John Paul II has continued that tradition.

The Eastern practice differs from the Latin practice in that married men normally may be ordained as priests; however, only unmarried priests may be chosen as bishops. Also, many men of Eastern rite Churches choose a celibate priesthood for the kingdom of God (cf. Catechism, nos. 1580, 1203).

While both the Latin and Eastern rites have made provisions for married men to become priests, they have *never* made provisions for priests to become married. Men considering the priesthood go through a period of discernment and years of formation concerning their vocation and its implication for their lives. Included in the discernment process is the prospect of celibacy. By the time the promise of celibacy is made at ordination, candidates have consented freely and with full knowledge. In rare circumstances, a priest may be dispensed from his vow or promise of celibacy and be laicized,

thereby terminating his ministry. While he may no longer serve normally as a priest, a laicized priest always remains a priest because of the indelible mark on his soul that the Sacrament of Holy Orders confers. Catholic priests who have left active ministry to get married may not thereafter return to function as priests, except in administering the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick when a member of the faithful is in danger of death.

### Marryin' Movement of Priests?

Many people who do not relate to celibacy as a gift rationalize that mandatory celibacy is likely to cause sexual problems. They argue that the discipline involves an abnormal repression of normal sexual inclinations. To them it is evident that such unhealthy repression can lead to inappropriate sexual behavior. Setting aside the question of whether such arguments are reasonable, empirical evidence does not support such a conclusion. The evidence does show, however, that priests are no more likely to engage in sexual wrongdoing than non-Catholic clergy, non-Catholic married clergy, or married men in general.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, if homosexual behaviors are excluded, priests are perhaps less likely than other male populations to engage in sexual abuse. Celibate priests are no more likely than Protestant ministers to engage in sexual abuse, and 90% of priest abuse cases involve post-pubescent males.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of those advocating the abolition of mandatory celibacy have been lobbying for many years for a married clergy in the Latin Church, as well as for women's ordination and "liberation" from Church teaching on morality issues such as contraception and abortion.

In recent years, many of these commentators have argued that the Church should do away with the celibacy requirement as a means of addressing the declining number of priests in our country. One frequently overlooked fact is that the number of seminarians worldwide is up 73%

since 1978—the year John Paul II became Pope—from 63,882 to 110,583 (according to the 2002 edition of the *Annuario Pontificio*, the official Vatican yearbook). Further, new vocations tend to be up dramatically where the teachings and practices of the Church—including priestly celibacy—are enthusiastically and unambiguously promoted. The shortage is typically most severe in areas where there is widespread dissent, and in many cases a crisis of faith.

### Eternal Rewards

Since He began gathering disciples, Jesus Christ has always called some to a life of continence for the sake of the kingdom of God. Those who conform themselves to the Bridegroom in this way have borne much fruit, not only for Church but also for themselves. As Our Lord promised:

“Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Lk. 18:29-30).

After affirming the Church’s “firm will” to maintain the discipline of priestly celibacy, Pope John Paul II, in union with the fathers of the 1990 Synod of Bishops, calls for a renewed appreciation of this precious charism:

The synod would like to see celibacy presented and explained in the fullness of its biblical, theological, and spiritual richness, as a precious gift given by God to His Church and as a sign of the kingdom which is not of this world—a sign of God’s love for this world and of the undivided love of the priest for God and for God’s people, with the result that celibacy is seen as a positive enrichment of the priesthood (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 29, footnote omitted).

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *The Demurrer Against the Heretics*, ch. 40. no. 5, in *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, ed. William A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970) vol. 1, 123.

<sup>2</sup> St. Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panacea Against All Heresies*, ch. 59, no. 4, in Jurgens, vol. 2, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Carthage (419), canon III, “Of Continence,” as found in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), vol. 14, 444.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Jenkins, “The Myth of the Pedophile Priest,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (March 3, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Plante, chair of psychology at Santa Clara University and professor of psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine, quoted by *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*, “Churches reel amid abuse charges,” *The Seattle Times/seattletimes.com* (March 18, 2002), [http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/134421921\\_priests18.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/134421921_priests18.html)

### RECOMMENDED READING

- Holy Bible* (Catholic edition)
- Catechism of the Catholic Church* (paperback and hardback available)
- Vatican II documents
- Pope Paul VI, *On Priestly Celibacy, Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*
- Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday*
- Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*
- Paul Thigpen, ed., *Shaken by Scandals*
- Fr. Peter Stravinskis, ed., *Priestly Celibacy*
- Cardinal Alfons Maria Stickler, *The Case for Clerical Celibacy*
- Fr. Christian Cochini, S.J., *The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy*
- Stefan Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church*

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