

Why Priests Don't Marry

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THE question "Why can't priests marry?" is often prompted by the unexpressed idea that a despotic Church prevents them from marrying. The truth is that they make a perfectly free choice in the matter. They make this choice after a very long period of preparation and trial. The normal way of training for the priesthood as envisaged by the Council of Trent is for the candidate to enter an ecclesiastical seminary as a boy and study there for thirteen years. Many boys remain at lay schools till they are about seventeen and then go to the seminary or ecclesiastical university for a six or seven years' course of philosophy and theology with their sister subjects. During all this time great attention is paid to their spiritual development. In prayer and devout exercises they test their resolve to dedicate themselves to the service of God in the celibate life. Some decide that this is not their vocation, and return to the life of a layman.

Some retire because they are not physically or mentally robust enough. Some are sent home by their superiors as unsuitable. None are forced to remain. Indeed this is strictly forbidden by the Canon Law of the Church. Canon 971 says, "It is a crime (nefas est) to force any one, in any way, for any reason, into the clerical state".

The vow of celibacy is taken at the ordination to the sub-diaconate. The 'taking of the step' at this ceremony is a dramatic moment. The candidates, dressed in albs, stand at the entrance to the sanctuary, facing the bishop, who is seated before the altar. He gives them a solemn address, at the end of which he says, "Up to now you have been free. You may still, if you choose, turn to the aims and desires of the world... Think then while there is time. If you want to continue with this sacred proposal, step forward in the name of God".

They step forward with determination, completely confident that with the help of God's grace they will stand firm in a resolve that has been tested over so many years. From now on they are wedded to the Church.

What are their motives in taking this step?

Practical Motive

The lowest motive (but a very good one) is the practical consideration that a married man must make the needs of his wife and family his first concern, whereas the ideal of the priest is to make the demands of his bishop and his people his first concern. In the marriage contract husband and wife dedicate themselves to the love and service of each other and their children. Our Lord confirmed the ancient law written in the book of Genesis, belonging to the very nature of this relationship between man and woman called marriage. "For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall be in one flesh. Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh" (Mt. 19:5-6).

For the average man married life involves not merely working for eight hours a day for at least five days a week to earn the money to keep wife and children, but also giving most of his leisure hours to living in and for the family. He is not merely a breadwinner, but the master of a home, the support and solace of a wife and a guide, philosopher and friend to his children. Even the man who need not earn a wage to keep his family must still have his attention absorbed by it, be emotionally involved in its spiritual problems and beset with care for its physical needs. It is rare for a priest to be a man of independent means and it is rarely possible for the priest to be provided with a salary sufficient to keep a wife and children, particularly in the mission fields, in persecuted countries and in the thousands of struggling parishes where vast debts on schools and church have to be shouldered. But even if this were possible, it would still be better for the priest to be without the care of a family.

St Paul, when recommending celibacy, makes this practical point:

"But I would have you to be without solicitude. He that is without a wife, is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God. But he that is with a wife, is solicitous for the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided" (1 Cor. 7:32-33).

Dollinger, the German theologian who was excommunicated in 1871 for refusing to accept the decrees of the Vatican Council on papal infallibility, appreciated this point. When "The Old Catholic Church", with which he was associated, proposed to introduce marriage of the clergy, he strongly advised against it. He wrote to a friend in England, "You in England cannot understand how completely ingrained it is into our people that a priest is a man who sanctifies himself for the sake of his parishioners. He has no children of his own, in order that all the children of the parish may be his children. His people know that his small wants are supplied, and that he can devote all his time and thought to them". The flock of the married clergyman knows "that when the interests of his family and those of his flock collide, his family must come first and his flock second. In short, he has a profession, a *gewerbe*, rather than a vocation. He has to earn his livelihood". (A. Plummer, in *The Expositor*, p. 470.)

Spiritual Motives

But such considerations do not preoccupy the subdeacon when the time comes for him to take the step forward. His motives are far nobler. He has that firm and calm resolve of the knights who knelt before their liege-lord and swore to serve him, under God, and to fight evil and protect the weak. He feels the joy of the bridegroom who grasps the hand of his bride and promises to take her "to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part". His promise is more noble even than these. It is a vow in the strict sense of the word, 'a promise made to God'. It has in it the bravery of the knight's promise, the tenderness of the bridegroom's, but in addition the noblest aspiration of the human heart, the worship of God. It is an act of religion.

The greatest act of love of which a man is capable is to give his life in the service of another.

"Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

When a man lays down his life for God, he is a martyr. Short of dying, a man can do no greater act than to dedicate his whole life to the service of God. That is the real reason for the vow of celibacy which the subdeacon takes. He may feel little emotion. It is a deliberate act of the will taken after

years of consideration. But it is the most generous act of which he is capable short of martyrdom, for he gives all his future life to God. In the words of Alice Meynell he might say:

*Who knows what days I answer for to-day?
Giving the bud I give the flower. I bow
This yet unfaded and a faded brow;
Bending these knees, and feeble knees, I pray.*

Imitation of Christ

The main motive of the young cleric as he takes his vow of celibacy is to make himself more like to Christ, who was Himself celibate, was born of a Virgin Mother and had as foster-father the virginal Joseph. The end of all Christian living is "Jesus Christ, yesterday and to-day, and the same for ever" (Heb. 13:8). They who are striving for perfection must have Christ constantly before their minds. "Let us run by patience to the fight proposed to us: looking on Jesus, the author and finisher of faith" (Heb. 12:1-2).

Pope Pius XI in his encyclical on the Catholic Priesthood *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, points to the Holy Family, which stands at the very centre of Christianity, to show the beauty of chastity.

"For the Divine Master showed such a high esteem for chastity, and exalted it as something beyond the common power; He Himself was the son of a Virgin Mother, *florem matris virginis*; and was brought up in the virgin family of Joseph and Mary; He showed love for pure souls such as the two Johns — the Baptist and the Evangelist".

He not only gave us the example in His own life. He recommended celibacy to His followers. As well as the commandments, the observance of which is necessary for salvation, Christ gave counsels for those who wish to strive for perfection. He made a clear distinction between the two when a young man came to Him for advice on how to save his soul. "Keep the commandments," said Jesus. The young man replied, "All these have I kept from my youth; what is yet wanting to me?" Obviously this young man needed a call to something higher. Jesus gave it to him. "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come follow me" (Matt. 19:21). There is the counsel of perfection, voluntary poverty, obviously not intended for everybody.

He gave another counsel of perfection to the Apostles. He had given the sublime doctrine of Christian marriage and the Apostles suggested that since it was so difficult it might be better not to marry. He did not entirely disagree with them. He would commend this refraining from marriage if it were for the sake of the Kingdom of God. "There are eunuchs (that is, celibates) who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of Heaven," He said (Matt. 19:12). But he added, let those who can understand this, do so. This counsel was not for all. He invited to continence those who would wish to dedicate themselves completely to striving to possess the Kingdom of Heaven.

St Paul taught this doctrine, in no better way than by the example of his own life, for he imitated Christ in his celibacy. "Be ye followers of me as I am of Christ," he said (1 Cor. 11:1). And when discussing this very matter of celibacy he says, "For I would that all men were even as myself" (1 Cor. 7:7).

Like his Master he knew the excellence of marriage, but taught also the greater excellence of celibacy, even apart from the practical considerations of which he speaks in verse 32-33 of the same

chapter already quoted above. He says it is a virtuous thing (kalon in Greek) to remain single for spiritual motives. He knows that this is not for everybody. "Everyone has his proper gift from God, one after this manner, and another after that." Moreover he tells those who have difficulty in remaining continent that it is better for them to marry. "But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt." Yet he says, "But I say to the unmarried and to the widows; it is good for them if they so continue, even as I" (1 Cor. 7).

Self-denial

There is in this the important element of self-denial, which plays such a vital part in the spiritual life. It is good for the spirit to go against the demands of the appetites that it might be free to "seek the things that are above" (Col. 3:1). Even on the natural level, the whole world admires the explorer or the mountaineer who suffers great physical hardships in the pursuit of knowledge or the service of his fellow men; and the men who do these things know how refining to the spirit are the hardships they endure. There is this natural refining element in all acts of self-denial, but when performed by the Christian for spiritual motives they also make reparation for sins and help to identify the sufferer with Christ who suffered on the Cross.

The three great vows of religion, voluntary poverty, perpetual chastity and entire obedience, are performed for this ascetical purpose. They aim to control the appetites in their three most clamorous desires which are the cause of so many and so great sins. These desires are God-given and are for the benefit of the human race, but because they are so powerful they can sweep the soul away into excesses which can destroy it. Hence they are the three gateways at which the devil attacks most. They are the sexual desire, the desire for property and the desire for liberty. They are good when exercised according to reason, but when uncontrolled lead to the lust, avarice and mad pride which have destroyed not only many men, but whole civilizations. These vices make a man hard, cruel, destructive. In them St John finds the whole summary of the opposition to Christ. "For all that is in the world, is the concupiscence of the flesh, and the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). The Christian who desires perfection gains complete mastery of self at these very places where the Devil attacks strongest. Many renounce lawful pleasure in sex, in property and in liberty in the three vows of the religious life. Some take all three vows, some two or one. But all take them to learn self-mastery "for the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12).

But the main purpose of the vow of celibacy is the positive one of advancing in the spiritual life. Priests and nuns seek to renounce all earthly love that they may be free to rise more speedily to the perfect love of God. Human love may hold us down to the earth: "For where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also" (Matt. 6:21).

Objections

Many people object that celibacy is wrong because it is unnatural. Sometimes the suggestion behind this objection is that it is impossible for priests to keep their vows. This is an affront to the millions of decent laymen who practice self-control while remaining unmarried. Moreover marriage does not remove all temptation to sexual abuse, as an hour spent in a divorce court or in reading the more lurid of our Sunday papers will show. It is often harder for the married to keep God's law than the celibate.

Sometimes the suggestion is that such unnatural self-control leads to frustration and loss of emotional balance. This is equally unrealistic. Frustration is the result of encouraging desires which are not properly satisfied. The libertine is frustrated, for happiness is not to be found in unbridled pleasure alone. Lovers are frustrated if fear and caution in the marriage act render them incapable of the full giving of self which love demands. But nuns and priests who are true to their high vocations are not frustrated, for they keep their thoughts chaste so that passions are not roused and yet allow their hearts to expand in love of God and those in their care. The nun gives a mother's love to those in her care, and the priest is aptly called 'father' by his spiritual children. If there are frustrated nuns and priests they are the ones who have ceased to live the spiritual life of prayer. The truly holy religious has a heart warm with the love of God and his fellow men.

Another objection is that unmarried priests have not the practical knowledge necessary to give advice on moral problems. The doctor of medicine treats diseases he has never had, using the accumulated knowledge of the centuries acquired in his studies. The priest acquires similar knowledge of human nature in years of study of moral theology and philosophy. But he can speak with greater authority than the doctor, because he has the guidance of a divinely inspired Church. Moreover his work in the confessional and in visiting his people gives him a unique knowledge of human nature in practice, and the problems not merely of one but of hundreds of families. It is a psychological fact that married people confide in him with greater confidence precisely because he is celibate.

The History of Clerical Celibacy

There were large numbers of devout Jews who lived celibate lives about the time of Christ. The reverence shown to John the Baptist shows how much such men were respected. The early Christians, most of whom were Jews, inherited this tradition. But they gained an added respect for celibacy from the example of Jesus and some of the noblest of his followers, such as St John the Evangelist and St Paul, and possibly many other of the disciples. It would be strange indeed if in that community of ardent lovers of Christ there were not many who followed His example and His counsel of perfection and dedicated themselves to His service in the celibate state. Priests surely must have given a lead in this matter. Marriage was not forbidden to them. Indeed it is clear that in the first three centuries at least married candidates for sacred orders were accepted. The Church contented herself with showing that self-control in the priest was to be expected by insisting on the prescriptions given by St Paul to Timothy and Titus that if the bishop or priest were married, he should at least be "a husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6), that is, a man who had not married a second time after the death of his first wife.

But gradually as more and more Christians, and among them more and more priests, sought perfection in the vow of celibacy, this began to be expected if not demanded of the good priest. Many married priests, particularly bishops, lived in the brother-and-sister relationship with their wives, or by mutual agreement separated from them.

Tertullian, a Christian lawyer and theologian, writing about the year A.D. 200, gives us valuable evidence. A widow had asked him if she should marry again. In his book *An Exhortation to Chastity* he urges her not to, and points to the large number of priests who gave her good example in this matter.

"How many of them we see in sacred orders who have chosen continence, who have preferred to be married to God, who have re-established the honour of their flesh, and although sons of time, mortifying in themselves for eternity, themselves consecrated themselves the concupiscence of desire, and all that is excluded from Paradise" (De Exhortatione Castitatis, chapter 13).

For the first three centuries then, there was no law which insisted that priests should not marry. But the ideal set up by Christ was widely followed among the clergy.

The Law of the Church

The first recorded law insisting on the celibacy of the clergy is Canon 33 of the Council of Elvira about the year 305, which forbids bishops priests and deacons to marry. Obviously this law does not suddenly appear 'out of the blue', but is the result of a widespread earlier practice.

This high regard for celibacy of the clergy was not confined to the West. St Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis at the end of the fourth century, goes even further than the Council of Elvira, and extends the law to apply to subdeacons as well as priests and deacons.

"The Church does not on any account admit a man living in the wedded state and having children, even though he have only one wife, to the orders of deacon, priest, bishop or subdeacon, but only him whose wife be dead or who would abstain from the use of marriage; this is done in those places especially where the ecclesiastical canons are accurately followed" (Adversus Haer. Panarion. 59, 4).

He hints that the law was often not observed; but there is no doubt that he regarded it as a law.

The Eastern Church

The end of the fourth century marks a divergence in the practice of the Eastern and Western parts of the Church. In the East the rulings of the Apostolic Constitutions, a collection of treatises on discipline, worship and doctrine gathered together in the fourth century, give us laws which are still the observance of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Eastern practice is thus summarized by the historian Hefele.

"(a) That the candidates for Holy Orders are dismissed from episcopal seminaries shortly before being ordained deacons, in order that they may marry (their partners being in fact mostly daughters of clergymen) and after their marriage return to the seminaries in order to take the higher orders; (b) that as priests they still continue the marriages thus contracted, but may not remarry on the death of their wife; and (c) that the Greek bishops, who may not continue their married life, are commonly not chosen out of the ranks of the married secular clergy, but from amongst the monks" (Beitrag zur Kirchengesch., Vol. 1, p. 139).

In fact the celibate priests in the Eastern Orthodox Churches have always been far more highly respected and influential with the people than the married clergy.

When various groups of Eastern Christians have returned to communion with the Holy See, they have been allowed to keep their ancient customs in this matter. But the proportion of subdeacons who take the vow of celibacy is constantly increasing, and the day may come when celibacy will be a universal law for them too.

Advance in the West

In the Western Church we find that from the beginning of the fourth century onwards laws insisting on celibacy grew in number and severity. By the end of the fourth century it was quite clear that it was the law of the Church as far as the West was concerned that all in Major Orders were bound to celibacy. Pope Siricius, writing to Spain in A.D. 385 and indicating that what he said was intended for the whole of the West, states the law clearly and appeals to Sacred Scripture to confirm it. The Synod of Carthage in A.D. 390 says that this had been an unwritten law in the Church since the days of the Apostles. "What the Apostles taught, and the early Church preserved, let us too observe" (Canon 3). Innocent I (A.D. 402-417) excommunicated priests who lived as married men. Leo the Great (A.D. 440-461) repeated this penalty. St Ambrose and St Augustine at the beginning of the fifth century taught that the married state was inconsistent with the sacred office of the priest. St Jerome, who lived at the same time, was vehement in his condemnation of married priests and bishops.

The law was one thing, the observance of it another. Breach of the law was very common. We find the same St Jerome saying, "The world is full of clerics, who having been married before their baptism and become widowers, have married again after their baptism, and I do not speak of priests and deacons, I speak of bishops: the number of them so great that it is greater than the number of the Fathers of the Council of Rimini" (Letter 59, Ad Oceanum). There were about three hundred bishops at that Council. But here the saint is exaggerating probably in his indignation. The fact that he says this with astonishment, indeed horror, shows that he regarded celibacy as the normal and commendable thing.

The history of this matter shows us the Church, from the fifth to the eleventh centuries, trying by legislation growing more and more insistent and strict, to enforce the law. Always the saintly souls upheld it and earnestly preached the observance of it. But in times of decadence, the breach of it was almost as common as the observance. In fact we might say that here we have a thermometer by which to tell the spiritual temperature of any age. In the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries there was much laxity. In the ninth the great reforms of Charlemagne tried to restore primitive strictness of life. There was decadence again in the tenth century, when many priests married openly in Germany and Gaul and lived openly with their wives. But it must be noticed that although such marriages were against the law and were strongly condemned by authority, the Church had not declared them invalid.

In the eleventh century five great popes in succession campaigned against incontinence among the clergy with great severity. Chief among them was Hildebrand, Gregory VII. He was utterly convinced that the universal observance of this law was essential if purity of Christian living was to be maintained. Under his pontificate many synods, such as those of Bruges in 1031, Rouen in 1073 and Winchester in 1076 (under Lanfranc), while recognizing the validity of marriages already contracted, absolutely forbade those in Major Orders to marry. Indeed Gregory VII, perhaps going beyond the bounds of discretion, forbade the people to attend the mass of a married priest.

Pope Calixtus II carried the war against marriage of the clergy further. The first Lateran Council convoked by him in 1123 declared marriages contracted by those in Major Orders after their ordination to be invalid. This fixed the law of the Western part of the Church once and for all. All popes repeated the prohibition of Calixtus, particularly against the Lollard and Lutheran attacks of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The custom of priests marrying died hard in England. In the fifteenth century it was being rigorously suppressed by the bishops. In the sixteenth a statute of Henry VIII declared it felony in England to defend marriage of the clergy as permissible by the law of God. The great reforming Council of Trent in 1545 not merely repeated the law most firmly, but marked the beginning of a universal observance of it throughout the Western Church. Its institution of ecclesiastical seminaries for the training of the clergy was a most vital contributory cause of the general reform in this matter.

That so many men are not merely prepared to dedicate themselves to the service of God and their people in the celibate state, but also live up to their high calling with such amazing fidelity, is perhaps the greatest glory of the Catholic Church today.

An avowed enemy of the Catholic Church, the renowned historian Professor Coulton, writes in the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

"It can scarcely be denied that the Roman Catholic clergy have always owed much of their influence to their celibacy, and that in many cases this influence has been most justly earned by the celibate's devotion to an unworldly ideal."

Instead of 'many' he might more fairly have written, 'nearly all'.
