

FR. CLIFF'S NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

Priests, Celibacy and Chastity

Priestly celibacy has come under attacked or debated over most of the history of the Church, but especially the last few years, as a response to the sexual abuse crisis. The entire subject is often mired in confusion and misinformation, generally from a lack of understanding. Fundamentalist Christians are often surprised to learn that even today celibacy is not the rule for all Catholic priests. In fact, for Eastern Rite Catholics, married priests are part of their tradition, just as they are for other Orthodox Christians.

Priestly celibacy has never been a dogmatic teaching of the Catholic Church. It is not an unchangeable teaching of the faith, not founded in Divine Revelation, either Scripture or Sacred Tradition, but a disciplinary rule. The Apostle Peter was married (Mark 1:30), and, according to St. Paul, traveled with his wife after Pentecost, as did other married, but unnamed Apostles (1 Cor. 9:5.)

Even in the Eastern churches, though, there have always been some restrictions on marriage and ordination. Although married men may become priests, unmarried priests may not marry, and married priests, if widowed, may not remarry. That practice continues with regard to married priests in the Catholic Church today.

The tradition in the Western or Latin-Rite Church has been for priests as well as bishops to take promised or vows of celibacy, a rule that has been firmly in place since the early Middle Ages. However, since the reign of Pope Paul VI in the 1970's, exceptions can be made. For example, there are married Roman Catholic priests who are ordained ministers in a Protestant tradition, but convert to Catholicism and wish to continue to minister.

Another, different Fundamentalist confusion is the notion that celibacy is unbiblical, or even "*unnatural*." They point to the biblical injunction: "*Be fruitful and multiply*" (Gen. 1:28); or to St. Paul, who says, "*each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband*" (1 Cor. 7:2). It is even sometimes argued that celibacy (which means to be unmarried) somehow "causes," or at least is attached to a higher incidence of, illicit sexual behavior or perversion.

All of this is false. Although most people are at some point in their lives called to the married state, the vocation of celibacy was explicitly advocated—as well as practiced—by both Jesus and Paul. So, far from requiring marriage, Paul actually endorses celibacy for those capable of it: "*To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion*" (7:8-9).

The development of the rule of Priestly Celibacy is rooted in an understanding of the purposes of the Sacraments of Marriage and Holy Orders, which make celibacy a practical issue. In the Sacrament of Marriage one is called to devote oneself 100% to ones spouse and family. In the Sacrament of Holy Orders ones is called to devote oneself 100% to the care of the community he is given by his Bishop. To combine both sacraments in a single person sets up a serious tension that makes a married priesthood very difficult, although not impossible.

Of course, all Christians are called to chastity, that is, sexual activity only within the context of the Sacrament of Marriage. The violation of chastity by anyone, outside the marital relationship, is a violation of the Sixth Commandment, and therefore sinful. Priests, or other ordained clergy, who attempt marriage are automatically suspended and face other penalties including dismissal from the clerical state (Canon #1394). Clerics who live in sins against the Sixth Commandment that produce scandal may be suspended and can finally be dismissed from the clerical state. In the case of other offenses against the Sixth Commandment committed by force or threats or publicly or with a minor under the age of 16, the cleric is to be punished with just penalties, including dismissal from the clerical state if the case so warrants. That is the Church law in regard to the obligation of chastity and celibacy.