

Priestly Celibacy

Karl Keating

Celibate means to be in an unmarried state. All Christians are called to live whatever state they are in in a chaste manner. Not all are called, however, to celibacy. Both Our Lord Jesus Christ and St. Paul did approve serving the kingdom in celibacy. Jesus said (Mt. 19:12): *“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.”*

St. Paul's position is much the same in 1 Cor. 7:7-38: *“I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do...everyone is to remain in the state to which he is called....Do not seek marriage. But if you marry, you do not sin. So that he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.”* These verses form the Scriptural rationale for the much-maligned Catholic requirement of celibacy for priests, monks, and nuns.

Celibacy has not been a rule for all Catholic priests. In the Eastern Rites, married men can be ordained; this has been the custom from the first. Once ordained, though, an unmarried priest may not marry, and a married priest, if widowed, may not remarry. Marriage is possible only for priests in the Eastern Rites. All monks in the East are celibate, and Eastern Rite bishops are always chosen from the ranks of the monks, which means all Eastern Rite bishops are unmarried.

In the West, of course, the rule has been different. In the early centuries priests and bishops could be married—the practices in the West and East were the same—but celibacy was soon preferred, and eventually it became mandatory. By the early Middle Ages, the rule of celibacy, in the Latin or Western Rite, was firmly in place. Note that this was a disciplinary rule, not a doctrine. The imposition of the rule did not imply a change of doctrine. In recent years we have seen a few married Latin Rite priests, some who were converts from Lutheranism or Anglicanism (Episcopalianism) and, as previous ministers, were married. These are clearly exceptions to the rule.

Many today do not approve of what they refer to as "mandatory celibacy," with emphasis on the adjective, as though the Church were imposing a discipline against the will of prospective priests. They have a number of arguments against celibacy. They say, first of all, that celibacy is unnatural. After all, they claim, God commanded all men to marry when he said, "Increase and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). Not so. "Increase and multiply" is a general precept for the human race; it does not bind each individual. If it did, every unmarried man (and woman, for that matter) of marrying age would be in a state of sin by remaining single. Christ himself would have been in violation of the commandment. If you exempt him because of his divinity, you still have John the Baptist and most of the apostles

sinning by not marrying. Remember that even Paul was single: "Now to the unmarried and to widows, I say: it is a good thing for them to remain as they are, as I do, but if they cannot exercise self-control they should marry, for it is better to marry than to be on fire" (1 Cor. 7:8-9).

Others note that "a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body" (Gen. 2:24). This means a man is supposed to marry, they say. But Christ praised those who would not only leave parents, but give up the chance for a wife and children: "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life." (Luke 18:29-30).

Paul insisted a bishop must be the husband of one wife (1 Tim. 3:2), note some, and this means that at least bishops must marry. Such a notion betrays an elementary confusion. The point of Paul's injunction is not that a man must be married to be a bishop, but that a bishop may not be married more than once. After all, if a bishop had to be married, Paul violated his own rule. A rule forbidding a man to have more than one wife—which means forbidding him to remarry after being widowed—does not order him to have at least one. A man who never marries does not violate the rule.

In the early years of the Church, because of the scarcity of single men who were eligible for ordination, men who were already married were accepted for the priesthood and episcopacy. Yet there is evidence that they may have been expected to remain sexually continent after ordination. As the supply of single, eligible men became greater, only single men were accepted for ordination in the West, in accordance with Paul's "wish [that] everyone . . . be as I am" (1 Cor. 7:7). The East kept to the old custom.

Some people get confused when they read that "forbidding to marry" (1 Tim. 4:3) appears to be a sign of an apostate church. The Catholic Church forbids some people, clergy and religious, to marry, so is it apostate? The Catholic Church does not forbid anyone to marry. Most Catholics marry with the Church's full blessing. The phrase "forbidding to marry" refers to people who declare all marriages to be evil. Some early heretics held this, as did the medieval Albigensians (Catharists). Marriage is not evil in the eyes of the Church (remember, it is the Catholic Church that claims Christ raised marriage to a sacrament), and no Catholic is forbidden to marry. It is true that Catholic priests in the West may not be married, but no one is obliged to become a priest. Marriage is not forbidden to them as human beings, but as priests. A Catholic man is free to choose the celibate priesthood, the married life, or even the single life (which also is celibate). Celibacy is forced on no one.

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Why was Jesus celibate?

To understand celibacy in the priesthood one must look back to the Person and example of Jesus Christ. In a society where marriage was the morally and religiously expected norm why was Jesus celibate? Everything He did had meaning and purpose. What was He saying by His unmarried state? Obviously He was not saying anything against marriage. At a time when divorce was permissible Jesus said that marriage was indissoluble. He often used parables of wedding banquets to illustrate the kingdom of God.

Christ's celibacy was a sign of His total dedication, His consecration, to the mission He received from His Father. Our Lord demonstrated that He was single-minded and single-hearted in His commitment to His vocation. It is in this context that we can understand His praise of those who freely leave all to follow Him, and those who choose to "not marry for the sake of the kingdom" (Mt 19:12)

Christ's celibacy also has a more profound, supernatural meaning. The Old Testament sometimes spoke of God as Israel's husband (Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:16-19) who would one day rejoice over Israel as a bridegroom over his bride (Isaiah 62:5). John the Baptist announced Christ as the Bridegroom (John 3:29) and the Lord affirmed it Himself (Mark 2:19; Mt. 25:1-13). Saint Paul spoke of the great mystery of the "one flesh" union between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:25-33). The Church, as a chaste virgin, is promised to her divine Husband (2 Cor. 11:2), so that we who are one Body may become one spirit with Him (1 Cor. 6:15-17). We therefore await His return in glory (Rev. 22:17) and our eternal communion with the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9). Understood in this context, Jesus Christ took no natural wife because He was already betrothed in a supernatural way to His Bride, the Church. "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her" (Ephesians 5:25).