

Why must Priests be Celibate?

It is important to recognize that there are two very different questions here:

- 1) Why can't married men become priests? and,
- 2) Why can't existing priests marry?

While the Church has sometimes allowed married men to become priests, it has never allowed existing priests to marry (and continue practicing their priesthood). Even the Eastern Orthodox churches who allow

married priests have never allowed them to marry after they were ordained a priest.

To understand this distinction better, it may help to look at the *permanent diaconate*, which currently allows for *married*, permanent deacons. The Church allows *married* men to become *permanent* deacons. But if their spouse dies, or if they are unmarried when they are ordained, they are not permitted to marry once they have been ordained.

The diaconate has two forms: *permanent* deacons (who may be married) and *transitional* deacons (who make a promise of celibacy). *Transitional* deacons are studying for the priesthood and their diaconate is only a temporary (transitional) stage on their way to being ordained a priest. Since the Roman Catholic Church normally selects her priests from those committed to celibacy, *transitional* deacons commit to celibacy when they become deacons.

While the Church, on rare occasion, does allow married men to become priests, it is unlikely that the Church would ever allow existing priests to marry and then still continue functioning as a priest (retain their priestly faculties).

With this in mind, let us look at the following explanation by Colin B. Donovan, STL as to why the Catholic Church retains the discipline of celibacy for the priesthood:

Celibacy of Priests by Colin B. Donovan, STL

Until Christ came along (Mt 19:12), and then Paul (1 Cor. 7:32-35), the only state of life known was marriage. The rabbis taught that a man was only half a man if he wasn't married by 20. But even in the Old Testament some of the prophets, like Elijah and Jeremiah, chose celibacy. By Jesus' time the great rabbis spoke of the possibility of "marrying Torah," that is, dedicating their whole life to the study of the Word. Paul was one who did, both before and after his conversion. Jesus is, of course, THE WORD, and infinitely more deserving of total dedication than the written word.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that Jesus should speak of some who would remain celibate ("eunuchs") for the sake of the Kingdom of God (Mt 19:12). St. Paul not only continued his preconversion celibacy as a Christian but recommended it for those who would be dedicated to serving God in this world (1 Cor. 7:7, 17, 32-35). He was speaking to a general audience and so he does not oblige it. But observe what he says in verse 17, "Only, everyone should live as the Lord has assigned, just as God called each one. I give this order in all the churches." This coincides with the admonition of Jesus to follow the vocation given by God, whether celibacy (Mt 19:12) or marriage (v.11).

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Now Jesus said that if one could accept celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom one should and Paul says it is the best way for those dedicated to the Kingdom, and BOTH of them lived this total dedication to the will of the Father for the salvation of souls. Given the mentality of the world, both Jewish and Pagan, it was impossible at the beginning to find mature candidates for the priesthood who were not already married. Only with the arrival of a generally Christian milieu, where virginity and celibacy were honored into adult life, would celibate candidates for Holy Orders be generally available. Not surprisingly, then, the Church discerned

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with time that the gift of celibacy from God (who alone can give such a gift), together with the desire to serve God and His people, was an indication of a vocation to the priesthood. THIS has not always and

everywhere been imposed in the Church, but almost immediately in Church history we find it recommended and even required in some places. Although Latin Rite Catholic priests for the last 1000 years have had to be celibate, Eastern Rite Catholic priests and priests of the Orthodox Churches (not in union with Rome) do not. However, ALL bishops in both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches MUST be celibates. They represent Christ to the people in their dioceses and Christ's bride is the Church (Eph 5:21-33) not someone else. So, it is entirely fitting that bishops not marry EVER and that priests not marry either, though in some traditions it is allowed PRIOR to ordination.

The fact that the apostles were married says nothing about the practice, since they were Jewish and followed the practices of their day, until Christ came along. Tradition affirms that they remained celibates after they followed Christ.

With the grace of Redemption came the possibility of celibacy and virginity for the sake of the Kingdom of God for more than the privileged few. It is a total gift of self to the Lord, fitting for those whose vocation is dedicated to love and service of God and neighbor. Unfortunately, it is something the worldly who do not understand the power of God have difficulty accepting, then as now.

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Single-Minded Devotion by Fr. Martin Pitstick

Part of the idea of celibacy is being *single-minded* for the Lord and His work:

"The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided." (1 Cor. 7: 32-24)

When we understand what the Church teaches about *Marriage* it becomes easier to understand what it teaches about celibacy in the *Priesthood*. Both Marriage and Holy Orders are sacraments of *service*. A married man's first obligation is his vocation of service to his wife and children. A celibate priest's first obligation is his vocation of service to the Church. One of our beliefs regarding the priesthood is that the priest acts "*in the person of Christ the head*" of the Church. When the priest blesses, anoints, absolves or offers the Sacrifice of the Mass, it is *Christ himself* who is acting. And since Christ is the *bridegroom* of the Church (see Eph 5:23 and 2Cor 11:2), the priest who acts *in the person of Christ*, is drawn into this spousal relationship of Christ to the Church. The priest's vocation of service to the Church is that of a spouse to his bride.

Just as a man forsakes all other women to give himself completely to his bride, a priest too forsakes all other women to give himself completely to the Church. The priest's embracing of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God (see Mat 19:12) is not primarily a "no" to marriage. It is instead a resounding "yes!" to being configured to *the Marriage of Christ to the Church*. A priest is a man who has been specially configured to act in the person of Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church.

What bride would not want her husband to be *completely devoted to her* to the exclusion of any marital relationship with other women? Would not the Church want this same commitment from those who are ordained to serve her as her Bridegroom? When people say that we might be able to attract more men to the priesthood if we don't ask them to make a celibate commitment, it is like a woman saying she might attract a husband easier if she didn't ask him to give up the possibility of marrying other women!

A priest's celibacy is a sign of Christ's complete and faithful, *spousal* commitment to his bride the Church. If the Church is his *spouse*, then he must make himself available to care for her needs and the needs of her children. There is sacrifice involved in any marriage. But the bridegroom does not focus on what he is giving up. Rather, he gazes upon his bride and is filled with longing to make a complete gift of himself to her.

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Because the priest is configured to the marriage of Christ to the Church in ordination, he cannot reconfigure himself to any other marriage afterwards. When we understand the priesthood as a kind of supernatural marriage, we can see that the Marriage to which the priest is configured is both of a more permanent and higher order than the marriage bond between a man and a woman. Earthly marriage is a beautiful sign that points forward to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb of God in heaven with his bride the Church. In heaven we will "*neither marry*" nor be "*given in marriage*" (Mat 22:30). Earthly marriage will cease when the heavenly reality toward which it points is accomplished. While the earthly marriage bond is only "till death," a priest is "a priest forever" (Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6) because his priesthood is a participation in the heavenly marriage between Christ, the bridegroom, and his Church.

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Even in the Old Covenant we see examples of this *single-minded devotion* in those who

refrained from sexual intercourse with their wives before certain activities so as to be wholly focused and dedicated to the task at hand. Soldiers refrained from sexual relations before going into battle, and priests before they offered sacrifice (1Sam 21:1-5; 2Sam 11:11; Ex 19:10,14-15; Ezek 44:26-27; Lev 15:8; Deut 23:10-11).

When the New Covenant priests offered the sacrifice of the Mass, it was only consistent with their Jewish mindset to dedicate themselves wholly to the service of the Lord by abstaining from sexual relations with their wives beforehand. This abstinence is called sexual *continence*. Tradition tells us that from the time of the Apostles, the norm for those who were ordained to serve as priests for the New Covenant, was sexual *continence*. This discipline of sexual *continence* later became one of *celibacy*, where only unmarried men, dedicated to celibacy, would be chosen for the priesthood. Stefan Heid outlines this development in his book, *Celibacy in the Early Church* (Ignatius Press, 2000).

We do not find it difficult to understand those who give up or postpone the possibility of marriage to pursue a career or to do some great work for humanity. Almost every comic book hero has to choose between "the girl" and his vocation to protect and serve the interests of humanity. Understood in this manner, we can recognize celibacy as a valuable and helpful part of a priest's vocation to serve the Church with single-minded, spousal devotion.

When we understand that Marriage is not primarily oriented to self-*fulfillment*, but rather to self-*gift* and *service*, we can understand how one might embrace celibacy in order to make a gift of one's self in a vocation of service to the Church. In Marriage, a man makes a complete *gift* of himself to his wife. He lays down his life for her and their children as Christ did for his bride, the Church. In doing so, a man *belongs* to his wife and children in a way that he will not *belong* to any other woman or children. He must give up part of his freedom in order to make this *total commitment* to them; but this is the *only* way that he can enter into this vocation of service in married love. And while this involves *sacrifice*, marriage is not primarily about what one *gives up*. It is about *whom* one gives one's self *to*. The motivation for this sacrificial gift is *love*.

Similarly, priestly celibacy is not about what the priest gives up, it is about his making a complete *gift*, body and soul to the Church, so that he may *belong* completely to the Church in a way that he belongs to no other. This is how he enters into his vocation of service to the Church as a priest. And just as there is great joy in a man giving himself completely to his wife in Marriage on the *natural* plane, there is also great joy in a man giving himself completely to the Church through priestly ministry, on the *supernatural* plane.

The words of Christ, "This is my body, given up for you," spoken by the priest at Mass, applies both to the married man, who gives his body and his life to his bride, and to the celibate priest, who gives his body and his life to the Church. Similarly, as the consummation of the marital act of love involves a total self-giving that brings life to the natural family, the consummation of the priestly act of love (saying Mass) brings the divine life of Christ to the family of God. In Marriage there is a *natural* fatherhood. In the Priesthood, there is a *spiritual* fatherhood. It has been said that the *supernatural* fatherhood of the priest is a truer fatherhood than the *natural* fatherhood of a married man, for the fatherhood of the priest is more closely rooted in the Fatherhood of God, who is Father over all.

With regard to the question of *intimacy*, it is worth pointing out the difference between *physical* and *spiritual* intimacy. "Priests 'have the opportunity to have a dynamic of intimacy with people often deeper than the intimacy of a married couple engaged in sexual intercourse. People turn to their priests during the most emotional points in their lives: the birth of a newborn, marriage, and death are just a few examples.'"¹ Priests touch people's souls with the divine intimacy of Christ when they forgive sins, baptize, and administer the Sacraments, which communicate the divine life of Christ.

There is also the *intimacy of prayer*. Those who are celibate for the Kingdom of God are called to draw their identity and their strength in a special way from their relationship with God. "Priestly consecration is not being set aside *from* love but is being set aside *for* love..."² Celibacy allows for a life of prayer and service for others that would be difficult to maintain otherwise.

Without a life of prayer, priestly celibacy would not make sense or be possible. The vocation of spiritual fatherhood cannot be maintained merely on the *natural* level. It is a *supernatural* reality that requires supernatural grace. On merely the *natural* level, celibacy makes no sense. It is a sign of contradiction to a world that can only accept *natural* realities. The gift of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God, points to a spiritual reality that will ultimately only be fully realized in heaven, where the only marriage that will remain is the marriage between God and His people.

¹ Fr. Thomas Acklin, O.S.B., *The Unchanging Heart of the Priesthood* (2006), 118.

² Acklin, 105.