

Celibacy and the Priesthood

Fundamentalist attacks on priestly celibacy come in a number of different forms—not all compatible with one another. There is almost no other subject about which so many *different* confusions exist.

The first and most basic confusion is thinking of priestly celibacy as a dogma or doctrine—a central and irreformable part of the faith, believed by Catholics to come from Jesus and the apostles. Thus some Fundamentalists make a great deal of a biblical reference to Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:30), apparently supposing that, if Catholics only knew that Peter had been married, they would be unable to regard him as the first pope. Again, Fundamentalist time lines of "Catholic inventions" (a popular literary form) assign "mandatory priestly celibacy" to this or that year in Church history, as if prior to this requirement the Church could not have been Catholic.

These Fundamentalists 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 the *norm*, just as they are for Orthodox and Oriental Christians.

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. Moreover, there is an ancient Eastern discipline of choosing bishops from the ranks of the celibate monks, so their bishops are all unmarried.

The tradition in the Western or Latin-Rite Church has been for priests as well as bishops to take vows of celibacy, a rule that has been firmly in place since the early Middle Ages. Even today, though, exceptions are made. For example, there are married Latin-Rite priests who are converts from Lutheranism and Episcopalianism.

As these variations and exceptions indicate, priestly celibacy is not an unchangeable dogma but a disciplinary rule. The fact that Peter was married is no more contrary to the Catholic faith than the fact that the pastor of the nearest Maronite Catholic church is married.

Is Marriage Mandatory?

Another, quite different Fundamentalist confusion is the notion that celibacy is unbiblical, or even "unnatural." Every man, it is claimed, must obey the biblical injunction to "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28); and Paul commands that "each man

should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). It is even argued that celibacy somehow "causes," or at least correlates with 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 is explicitly advocated—as well as practiced—by both Jesus and Paul.

So far from "commanding" marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, in that very chapter 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).

It is only because of this "temptation to immorality" (7:2) that Paul gives the teaching about each man and woman having a spouse and giving each other their "conjugal rights" (7:3); he specifically clarifies, "I say this *by way of concession, not of command*. 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" (7:6-7, emphasis added).

Paul even goes on to make a case for *preferring* celibacy to marriage: "Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. . . those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. . . . 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. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband" (7:27-34).

Paul's conclusion: He who marries "does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better" (7:38).

Paul was not the first apostle to conclude that celibacy is, in some sense, "better" than marriage. After Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 on divorce and remarriage, the disciples exclaimed, "If such is the case between a man and his wife, it is better not to marry" (Matt 19:10). This remark prompted Jesus' teaching on the value of celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom":

"Not all can accept this word, but only those to whom it is granted. Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of God. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it" (Matt. 19:11–12).

Notice that this sort of celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom" is a gift, a call that is not granted to all, or even most people, but is granted to some. Other people are called to marriage. It is true that too often individuals in both vocations fall short of the requirements of their state, but this does not diminish either vocation, nor does it mean that the individuals in question were "not really called" to that vocation. The sin of a

priest doesn't necessarily prove that he never should have taken a vow of celibacy, any more than the sin of a married man or woman proves that he or she never should have gotten married. It is possible for us to fall short of our own true calling.

Celibacy is neither unnatural nor unbiblical. "Be fruitful and multiply" is not binding upon every individual; rather, it is a general precept for the human race. Otherwise, every unmarried man and woman of marrying age would be in a state of sin by remaining single, and Jesus and Paul would be guilty of advocating sin as well as committing it.