

the rule of celibacy. Pope Gregory VII in 1075 forbade married priests or those who had concubines from saying Mass or performing other ecclesiastical functions, and forbade the laity from hearing these Masses or participating in other liturgical functions offered by such priests. Finally, the First Lateran Council (1123), an ecumenical council of the Church, mandated celibacy for the Western clergy. The Second Lateran Council (1139) subsequently decreed Holy Orders as an impediment to marriage, making any attempt at marriage by an ordained cleric invalid. Finally, the regulations concerning celibacy seemed clear and consistent throughout the Catholic Church.

Later, Protestant leaders ridiculed and attacked the discipline of clerical celibacy, partly because of some of the notorious abuses during the Renaissance. In response, the Council of Trent in its *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Orders* (1563) stipulated that although celibacy was not a divine law, the Church had the authority to impose celibacy as a discipline. While holding celibacy in high regard, the Church did not diminish the sanctity of marriage or marital love. Moreover, the Council asserted that celibacy was not impossible to live but at the same time recognized that celibates needed the grace of God to do so.

The Catholic Church has continued to affirm the discipline of clerical celibacy, most recently in the Second Vatican Council's decree *Presbyterorum ordinis* (1965), Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*

(1967), and in the *Code of Canon Law* (1983).

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**Pamphlet 018**

## Celibacy in the Priesthood

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Lately, there has been so much talk about whether or not priests should get married. Why does the Church mandate that priests be celibate?

In examining the issue of celibacy, we should first address its historical development in the life of the Church and then, next week, its spiritual basis and relevance for today's clergy.



Our Lord presented celibacy as a legitimate lifestyle not only by His very life, since He never married, but also in His teaching. When our Lord emphasized that marriage was a covenant between husband and wife and thereby prohibited divorce and re-marriage (cf. Mt 19:3-12), He concluded, "Some men are incapable of sexual activity from birth; some have been deliberately made so; and some there are who have freely renounced sex for the sake of God's reign." Traditionally, our Church — as cited in the *Catechism* (No. 1579) — points to this "free

renunciation of sex for the sake of God's reign" as a basis for celibacy.

Nevertheless, in the early Church, clerical celibacy was not mandated. St. Paul in his first letter to St. Timothy wrote, "A bishop must be irreproachable, married only once, of even temper, self-controlled, modest, and hospitable" (3:2) and "Deacons may be married but once and must be good managers of their children and their households" (3:12). However, one should not erroneously construe this teaching to mean that a bishop, priest, or deacon had to be married; St. Paul admitted that he himself was not married (1 Cor 7:8).

Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) echoed St. Paul's teaching: "All the same, the Church fully receives the husband of one wife whether he be priest or deacon or layman, supposing always that he uses his marriage blamelessly, and such a one shall be saved in the begetting of children."

Nevertheless, the move to clerical celibacy began to grow in areas of the Church. St. Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403) stated, "Holy Church respects the dignity of the priesthood to such a point that she does not admit to the diaconate, the priesthood or the episcopate, nor even to the subdiaconate, anyone still living in marriage and begetting children. She accepts only him who if married gives up his wife or has lost her by death, especially in those places where the ecclesiastical canons are strictly attended to." The local, Spanish Council of Elvira (306) imposed celibacy on bishops, priests,

and deacons: "We decree that all bishops, priests, deacons, and all clerics engaged in the ministry are forbidden entirely to live with their wives and to beget children: whoever shall do so will be deposed from the clerical dignity." Later, the Council of Carthage extended the celibacy requirement to the subdiaconate.

After the legalization of Christianity in 313, greater discussion regarding clerical celibacy emerged. At the ecumenical Council of Nicea I (325), Bishop Hosius of Cordova proposed a decree mandating clerical celibacy, including for those clergy already married. Egyptian Bishop Paphnutius, unmarried himself, rose in protest, asserting that such a requirement would be too rigorous and imprudent. Rather, those members of the clergy already married should continue to be faithful to their wives, and those who were unmarried should personally decide whether or not to be celibate. As a consequence, no church-wide requirement for priests to be celibate was mandated.

During this time, however, the new spiritual fervor of "white martyrdom" arose. During the persecution, many suffered "red martyrdom," the shedding of their blood for the faith. With white martyrdom, men and women chose to renounce the things of this world and to die to their old selves so as to rise to live a life totally dedicated to Christ. This notion of a white martyrdom was the thrust behind monasticism and the vows of poverty, chastity (including celibacy), and obedience.

At this point, the tradition of clerical celibacy differed between the Western and Eastern traditions of the Church. For the Western Church several popes decreed celibacy: Damasus I (384), Siricius (385), Innocent I (404), and Leo I (458). Local councils issued edicts imposing celibacy on the clergy: in Africa, Carthage (390, 401-19); in France, Orange (441) and Tours (461); and in Italy, Turin (398). By the time of Pope Leo I (d. 461), no bishop, priest, deacon, or subdeacon could be married. Nevertheless, the rules were not always as enforced as they should have been.

In the Eastern Church, a distinction was made between bishops and other clergy as to whether they had to be celibate. Emperor Justinian's Code of Civil Law forbade anyone who had children or even nephews to be consecrated a bishop. The Council of Trullo (692) mandated that a bishop be celibate, and if he were married, he would have to separate from his wife before his consecration. Priests, deacons, and subdeacons were forbidden to marry after ordination, although they were to continue to fulfill their marital vows if married before ordination. These regulations still stand for most of the Eastern Churches.

Sadly, in the Middle Ages, abuses of clerical celibacy arose, which incited a strong reaction from the Church. The Synod of Augsburg (952), and the local Councils of Anse (994) and Poitiers (1000) all affirmed