

ON THE PRIESTHOOD

This article is an attempt to clarify what we mean by priests and why an ordained priesthood is necessary for the Church. It will also describe the history and rationale for mandatory celibacy in the Latin Rite, and its preferred status in the Eastern rites.

I. WHAT IS A PRIEST?

A priest is a minister ordained by the Church to act in the person of Christ for the purpose of bringing His presence to the rest of humanity. Certainly all people are called to be witnesses of Christ. See, e.g., Matt. 5:13-16. However, in addition to calling all people to holiness, Jesus specifically selected twelve men, called apostles, and later St. Paul, to begin and lead His church and have special authority to confer God's saving power on earth. Those men in turn understood that they had to power to appoint successors, such as Saints Matthias and Barnabas, who would join in their full apostolic authority. See, e.g., Acts 1:15-26, 14:1-4; 1 Cor. 9:4-6; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 4:11. These leaders in turn appointed others, who would eventually be called presbyters (Latin for priests) and deacons to help them in their ministry. See Acts 6:1-7, 14:23, 15:2, 20:17; 1 Tim. 3:1-13, 5:17-23; Titus 1:5. The successors to the apostles, who would be called *episcopi* in Latin, and bishops in English, were clearly in the leadership role, with authority over the church in whole regions, or (as with Saints Paul and Barnabas) in special large missions. And they could in turn and did appoint priests and deacons, as Saint Paul instructed early the bishops Saint Timothy and Titus to do in his letters to them. The deacons would be assisting the bishops and their appointees in charitable work, teaching, preaching and sacraments. Priests had the special ministry of carrying out the role of these successors of the apostles without authority to lead the church in whole areas or appoint other priest or deacons. The way we phrase this today is to say that the bishops are successors to the apostles with the fullness of the priesthood. Priests are co-workers of the bishops in this apostolic role in acting in the person of Christ and thus bringing His power to earth. And deacons are specially ordained assistants to the bishop and, under his authority, to the priests. See Catechism 1555-71.

Some people object that there is a "priesthood of all believers," especially quoting from the First Letter of Peter, in which he says "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." 1 Pet. 2:9. The Catholic Church does not disagree, and affirms that all the faithful are called to this priesthood of all believers. See Catechism 1546-47. The much misunderstood sacrament of Confirmation is especially associated with this priesthood of all believers, giving the power of the Holy Spirit to believers as occurred at Pentecost, to

make them more conformed to Christ and witnesses to Him before all the world. See Catechism 1302-05. However, as St. Paul says over and over again, there are different roles in the Church, which complement each other. See, e.g., Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Eph. 4:7-16. There are married couples; there are people consecrated in single life; and there are ordained ministers. Jesus instructed the twelve Apostles to celebrate the Mass, teach the faithful and lead the Church for all time and unto the ends of the world. Accomplishing this permanent and world-wide mission implied the need for a special ordained ministry would continue this special apostolic ministry to all the world and continue until the end of time. See, e.g., Matt. 28:16-20; Luke 22:19-20; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 11:23-26. Bishops and priests act in the person of Christ to continue this ministry of bringing that forgiving, teaching, and sanctifying mission of Christ to all the world and unto the end of time, with deacons as their assistants.

II. THE VOWS OF A PRIEST

We next consider the seven solemn promises a priest makes that he be fitted for this glorious role. A man makes two of these promises, of celibacy and obedience, when he is ordained a transitional deacon. For priesthood, he repeats the promise of obedience and makes five more solemn promises.

A. CELIBACY

To be ordained a deacon in preparation for the priesthood (called a transitional deacon) a man in the Latin rite promises perpetual celibacy. This promise allows him to be fully consecrated for the kingdom of God in imitation of Christ and of the saints in heaven, who have risen beyond earthly marriage to celebrate the heavenly wedding feast. See Matt. 22:23-33. Jesus took the Church as His mystical bride and the priest, acting in imitation of Him, does the same, giving up earthly marriage to be more fully a mystical husband to the church. See Eph. 5:21-33; Rev. 19:7-9, 21:2. Priests do not consider earthly marriages to be unworthy any more than a man who marries one woman disparages the marriages of other men to other women; but a man has only one heart to give and a priest gives that love to the Church. It follows from the fact that priests act with the masculinity of Christ and become mystical husbands of the Church that only men can be priests. On the complementary side, religious sisters, on behalf of the Church, are mystically espoused to Christ. This issue is of such controversy and misunderstanding that part IV of this article will address it at greater length.

B. Obedience

A deacon also makes a solemn promise to respect and obey his bishop (or religious superior in the case of a religious order cleric), and that vow is repeated at priesthood. A priest receives extraordinary power through his ordination. He receives power to call Christ down from heaven in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist, power to proclaim the word of God and speak for the Church, and power to guide people in their spiritual and moral lives and thus on the path to heaven. As a strong army or the waters of mighty rivers must be ordered lest they be chaotic and destructive, even more so this army of heaven, this supernatural power that flows from the celestial realms, must be united and ordered to bring glory to God's kingdom. In the Bible, the book Acts of the Apostles shows the power of a united church under the Apostles, led by St. Peter, to take on the world. Likewise, the priests of each diocese must be united under a bishop, the priests of each religious order under a superior, and all under the Pope, the successor of St. Peter, to form this united army of God. Governance decisions in the church can be mistaken, and a priest may disagree with a decision of a bishop or the Pope; but, like those in the military, they promise to carry them out faithfully, assuming that they are not contrary to moral and church law. Otherwise, divisions would weaken the effort and have each group go off on its own, as we have seen in the divisions among even our noble Protestant brothers and sisters.

C. To be a Co-worker with the Bishop and Other priests

Likewise, the priests of each diocese and religious order are bound together in what the Vatican II Council called a "sacramental brotherhood." To forge this brotherhood, priests also make a promise to be co-workers with the bishop and fellow priests in the presbyteral rank. Priests thus do not act as lone rangers, but more as Knights of the Round Table, together promoting and defending the kingdom of God on earth.

D. Prayer

Before being ordained a deacon, a man promises to maintain and deepen a life of prayer, including praying the Liturgy of the Hours each day. He then renews this promise before being ordained a priest. Everyone should pray regularly, but a full life of deep prayer is particularly important for a priest. There is an ancient saying, "No one can give what he has not received." In order to remain a faithful and effective ambassador of Christ, as St. Paul says a minister is, a priest must remain near Christ; and that demands regular prayer. See 2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20. A required part of this regular prayer is for priests and deacons to pray each day the Liturgy of the Hours, which is also called the Divine Office. This liturgy is a series of prayers, centered on the Psalms and other canticles of the Bible, that a diocesan priest prays five times a day. The particular prayers are: The Office of Readings, which has longer readings from Scripture and church writings, Morning Prayer, Daytime Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer. (Monks and nuns usually pray three Daytime Prayers.) These prayers give a regular, steady order to the day and unite prayer of each individual with those psalms, canticles and other prayers that the people of God have been offering throughout the centuries and will offer until the end of time. As the instructions to the Divine Office state, this liturgy, like with all continual prayer, promotes "the sanctification of the day and the whole range of human activity."

E. Celebration of the Mysteries of the Faith

Before ordination, a priest also promises to "celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously" as the Church has given them for God's glory and the people's holiness. The mysteries of Christ are the sacraments and other liturgies of the Church, such as burials and Eucharistic adoration. They are mysteries because they express and convey in visible form the invisible and mysterious grace, glory and power of the kingdom of God. The sacraments and other liturgies are not simply private devotions. They are the prayer of Jesus Christ through the Church and, as such, unite the Church throughout space and time and between heaven and earth. See Catechism 1139-40. For, as the Vatican II Council said, the liturgies of the Church reflect on earth the celestial prayers of the angels and saints in heaven, as especially described in the Book of Revelation. See Sacrosanctum Concilium 8; Catechism 1137-39. The sacraments in particular send forth the power of heaven to earth in different forms; and a priest, in being given the authority to celebrate these sacraments, receives the ability to open the floodgates of heaven that its graces may come down to earth. Because these liturgies are not the priest's own possession, but rather the Church's inheritance entrusted to the priest, he promises to celebrate them exactly according to the instructions handed on by the Church. These instructions preserve unity, accuracy of faith, and reverence whenever the rites are celebrated.

F. Teaching the Faith

Before ordination, a priest promises to "exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely, preaching the Gospel and explaining the Catholic faith." In describing the roles of priest, the Vatican II Council's said in Presbyterorum Ordinis, "The People of God finds its unity first of all through the Word of the living God, which is quite properly sought from the lips of priests. . . . Priests owe it to everybody to share with them the truth of the Gospel in which they rejoice in the Lord." Before ordination, all seminarians solemnly affirm that they believe and will proclaim faithfully all of the Catholic Church's doctrines. At ordination, a priest promises to do so "worthily and wisely," which in turn means that he will both learn more and more about the faith and put great effort into teaching it well. This teaching role comes in many forms. For example, parish priests: preach homilies during Mass, especially on Sundays; teach in parish school and religious education programs; help couples prepare for marriage; meet with people to discuss their preparation for other sacraments such as confirmation and the baptism of their children; field questions from many people, Catholic and otherwise, about the faith; write articles; and teach Bible studies, classes for adults who are preparing to enter the Church, and other educational sessions such as this parish's summer Wednesday night presentations on the faith. Some priests are also specifically assigned to teach in such places as high schools, universities, or seminaries. In order to carry out this teaching role effectively, seminarians have at least six years of training, not only academically but in also formation in such fields as public speaking, classroom presentations, and one-on-one or group discussions. Furthermore, as any professional, such as a doctor, lawyer, teacher, or engineer, should upgrade his education continually, all the more is a priest called continually to study theology, the world around him, and the means of conveying the faith more effectively.

G. Living in Imitation of Christ

However, conveying the faith through teaching has a very limited effect if a priest's life does not support that teaching. As St. Charles Borromeo, the great sixteenth bishop of Milan, wrote to his clergy "Prepare diligently and study well. But be sure that you first preach by the way you live. If you do not, people will notice that you preach one thing and live otherwise, and your words will bring only cynical laughter and a derisive shake of the head." And so a priest, because he is called to teach by word and example and because of his sacred calling to make Christ present through prayer and sacraments, also promises "to consecrate [his] life to God

for the salvation of His people and unite [himself] more closely each day to Christ the High Priest who offered Himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice." A priest is called, not only to live out the moral law, but to go further and make his life, in the words of St. Paul, "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God," to act as Christ in the world. See Rom. 12:1. Chaucer's description of an ideal parish priest, which is still in Catholic prayer books to this day concludes, "He taught the lore of Christ, and His apostles twelve/ But followed it first himself."

III. HOW DID CELIBACY BECOME REQUIRED FOR PRIESTS

Among the Apostles, the first priests and bishops, St. Peter was at some time married, while St. John was clearly single. The Bible does not say whether the other Apostles were married, nor whether St. Peter's wife was still living when Jesus called him. But the Bible does not mention of any living wife of an Apostle; the Gospels describe only St. Peter's mother-in-law. Furthermore, the Apostles certainly did not act as married men. As Cardinal Gibbons, the great nineteenth century Archbishop of Baltimore, argued in his classic Faith of Our Fathers, when St. Peter said to Christ, "We have left everything to follow you," see Matt. 19:27, he must have included giving up married life; otherwise the phrase "all things" would hardly be true. Thus, it seems that the Apostles were unmarried, or at least lived as such, a state that Jesus lived and endorsed for those consecrated by God. See Matt 19:10-12, 29.

In the early Church, married clergy were permitted because most young men were married, and the rapidly growing Church needed priests. However, St. Paul recommended celibacy for the sake of total service to God and instructed that clergy may be married only once. 1 Cor. 7:32-35; 1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6. He did not mean that bishops and priests could have only one wife at a time, for that was true for all Christians. The meaning was clearly that, if a cleric's wife died, he would not remarry, for the celibate state was preferred. And it has been the Church's consistent rule that, once a man becomes a deacon, priest, or bishop, he is consecrated to the Church and cannot marry after that time.

After the Christianity was legalized in 312-313, two different traditions developed. In the Western Roman Empire, from which the Latin rite of the Church grew, there was generally a requirement that all bishops, priests, and often deacons to be single, or live apart from their wives. For example, in 305, the Spanish bishops required priestly celibacy, and St. Jerome, the greatest Latin Scriptural commentator, described it as the common rule. The areas of the Church further East had a preference for single priests. However, as an accommodation, they admitted married men into the priesthood. Bishops were always unmarried, and priests never married after ordination. Those areas of the Church would become the Eastern rites of the Catholic Church, as well as the Orthodox churches,

who still generally permit married priests.

As the faith came to barbarian lands, the Latin rite sometimes relaxed the requirement of celibacy in order to have more native priests among the recently pagan. However, such permission was never considered ideal, and it led to a certain worldliness and lack of flexibility among the priests. The missionaries, such as St. Patrick, St. Augustine of Canterbury, St. Boniface, and the brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius, who brought the faith to the Slavic nations, were consistently celibate. In response to the decadence of the late ninth and tenth centuries, the Popes of the eleventh century sponsored reforms to make the Church stronger and the clergy more dedicated. And the great reformer Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) confirmed celibacy as required for all priests in the Latin rite, a rule that has lasted for almost a millinium and which the Vatican strongly upholds, even though it has allowed some married Anglican priests and occasionally Protestant ministers who converted to Catholicism to become priests.

IV. WHY IS CELIBACY REQUIRED

In Presbyterum Ordinis, the Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests, the Vatican II Council gave four reasons for this priestly celibacy: (1) living in imitation of Christ; (2) freedom for an unencumbered dedication to ministry and spiritual fatherhood; (3) the ability to take the Church as a priest's mystical spouse; and (4) the ability to live in imitation of the saints and angels.

A priest is, above all else, a man consecrated to bring Jesus Christ into the world, through sacraments, teaching, prayer, charity and sacrifice. Christ was unmarried, for He is totally consecrated in His saving and sanctifying mission to all people. If a priest is to act as another Christ in the world, it makes sense for him to live as much as possible like Christ and thus to be consecrated in celibacy as well. On a related point, celibacy makes a priest more free to serve, as Jesus did, all those who come to him. In marriage a man is consecrated first to his wife and children, and, in the case of a Catholic marriage, to making his family what the Vatican II Council called a "domestic church." See Vatican II Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity 11. But a priest, like Christ, should be able to serve all people as they come, to be a father to a whole parish or other group, generous in time, prayer and effort. It is noteworthy that the great Catholic missionaries were almost all single, and that, in the Latin rite, people expect priests to be much more available to the public and event at parish events than would be expected in the Eastern rites. Celibacy thus gives the freedom for the universal generosity fitted for a priest.

On a third point, celibacy gives a greater freedom for total love of the Church, the love that Jesus Christ lives as He takes the Church for His mystical spouse. See Eph. 5:32-33; Rev. 21:2, 9-10. A husband and father should have a passionate and ennobling love for

his wife and likewise a protective and generous love for his children. A priest should also have a passionate love, but here for a beautiful woman, Holy Mother Church and for the Mass and for wisdom and theology. He should see all of his people as his children and have a father's love for them. Although it is possible to have such a passionate love for both a specific family and for the Church, as in the case of many Eastern rite priests, there is a division and competing loves. Precisely because the Church considers marriage, as well as priesthood and religious life, to be a full and total vocation, she does not wish for this division.

Finally, priests are meant to be an image of the holiness and joy of the saints and angels in heaven. The saints, like the angels, are not married for they join completely in the wedding feast of the Lamb. See Matt. 22:30. And priests, trying to imitate their life as closely as possible, find celibacy a means of doing so. Before Mount Sinai, the people were to remain celibate for three days in order to experience the great theophany there; and priests of the Old Covenant refrained from conjugal relations for at least a day before conducting liturgies in the Temple. See Ex. 19:15; Lev. 15:18; 1 Sam. 21:5. Every day a priest celebrates the Mass, of which even the theophany of Mount Sinai was but an image, entering into the final Temple the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. Cf. Heb. 12:18-24. If even the Levitical priests remained celibate for a day to join in a glorious but lesser worship on occasion, it makes sense that the priests maintains continual celibacy to join with the angels and saints each day and draw the power of the Cross and Resurrection to world.