

The Case for Priestly Celibacy: Part I

By Greg Witherow

Catholics are sometimes challenged to defend the celibacy of their priesthood, a practice that is uniquely Catholic¹. Virtually all Protestant churches have married pastors while virtually no Catholic parish has a married priest. The difficulty for the Catholic is that there are passages of scripture that seem to indicate marriage is a **mandatory condition** for a man to be a bishop or presbyter². In this essay we will first restate the Catholic context for priestly celibacy and then address passages of scripture that at first blush seem problematic to the Catholic celibacy rule.

To begin with, Catholic teaching in general falls into the categories of either dogma or discipline. Dogmas are teachings of the Church that will never change. For example, the male-only priesthood is a dogma of the Church and therefore by definition will never change. However, the rule of a celibate priesthood falls into the category of a discipline of the Church. It therefore in theory can change. This distinction between dogma and discipline must be clear in our minds when framing the context of the celibate priesthood. Disciplines, like dogmas, are binding and must be followed by the Catholic faithful. But is such a category Biblical? Are there teachings in scripture, specifically the New Testament, that are regarded as both binding and temporary. The answer is yes.

In 1 Corinthians 11 the Corinthians are admonished by Paul to obey the traditions as they've been handed down to them. He then focuses on a particular tradition they need to be reminded of, namely the covering of a woman's head in worship. This is a command that seems to appear out of the blue. Christ never spoke of this. And there is no allusion or even hint of this requirement in the Old Testament. Yet Paul makes it clear at the end of the chapter that **this was a binding matter**, not a matter of conscience. And in this case, it was to be obeyed universally by the Church, regardless of the local culture.

Contemporary Protestants debate whether the Pauline requirement was for an actual veil or long hair to be worn by the woman. Whatever the requirement was, it was considered shameful in the churches if a woman didn't have "it" on. It would be **as if** she were shaved bald. But regardless, virtually no Protestant church today requires anything on a woman's head based on this passage³. They therefore by implication concede the concept of commands that can be categorized as a "discipline", commands that can change with circumstances. But a major difference between the two camps is this; for the Protestant **it is the individual who decides** what passages of scripture are applicable for contemporary Christians. For the Catholic, it is the Church Magisterium that decides

¹ This is true in comparison to Protestantism, not other faiths.

² Catholic priests are also called presbyters. For example, in section 1538 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church it states, "Today the word ordination is reserved for the sacramental act which integrates a man into the order of bishops, presbyters, or deacons".

³ The exceptions are the Amish and some of the more traditional Mennonites. There are other pockets of individuals who still practice this devotion. But the practitioners of veil wearing in Protestant churches believe it is a Biblical mandate (dogma) that should be obeyed by all. Catholics who wear veils do so out of personal devotion, following a traditional Catholic practice that originated in the Pauline teaching.

what is applicable⁴. But regardless, this is an example where Protestants and Catholics agree a Pauline command is no longer required in our contemporary culture⁵. By definition, this type of command is what the Catholic Church refers to as a discipline.

We can now turn to our topic and ask the question, why does the Catholic Church not have married priests? The answer is that actually, she does.

The Catholic Church is not one monolithic institution. In fact, she is made up of 23 different rites, each with their own disciplines, liturgy and canon laws. The largest of these rites is the Latin (Roman) rite. The remaining 22 rites are sometimes referred to as the Eastern rite Catholic churches. So while it is correct to say that all Roman Catholics are Catholics, it is not correct to say that all Catholics are Roman Catholics. What binds these churches of various rites are a common faith (dogma) as described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church⁶, a common Eucharist and sacraments as well as a shared communion with the Bishop of Rome; the Pope. Eastern rite churches, unlike the Latin rite, allow for married priests⁷. And it must be noted that even in the Latin rite, Protestant clergy that convert to Catholicism can get a dispensation from Rome to enter the priesthood. So it is important to remember, when we are discussing the celibacy of the priesthood we are primarily talking about the Latin (Roman) rite of the Catholic Church.

Thus far we've established that under certain circumstances that priests can be married. This is the case in the Eastern rite churches and with special permission, in the Latin rite also. We've also demonstrated that the requirement of celibacy is a discipline that in theory can be changed. But Protestants will still protest that the Bible specifically requires that bishops and priests (pastors) must be married in order to qualify for their office. Let us now turn our attention to this claim.

⁴ In the Latin rite women were required to wear a veil until the 1982 change in Canon law. Additional examples of discipline in the New Testament are the requirement not to eat blood in Acts 15:29 and the practicing of registering widows in 1 Timothy 5. The passage in 1 Timothy seems to be an embryonic order (similar to nuns) that were bound by vows of celibacy in their widowhood (i.e. they will not remarry). This registry of widows required the women to be over the age of 60, have only one previous husband and a lifetime service of washing the feet of the saints. There is no Protestant church today that has anything like this in their "rule book". But this discipline is mimicked in different Catholic orders by sisters who have vowed not to marry, have dedicated their lives to supplication and prayer and who are supported through by the Church.

⁵ Left unchecked by the authority of the Magisterium, this type of judgment call can run amok. All sorts of modernizing and unbiblical liberalism has entered Protestant churches that don't have the protection of the Magisterium. Gay bishops, gay marriage, women pastors-priests-bishops are part of a long list of examples.

⁶ Notice that it is not called the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church. That is because it is a catechism for all Catholics, regardless of what rite they belong to.

⁷ Bishops for Eastern rite churches are required to be in a celibate state. And Priests can only be married if they were married before ordination. After ordination they cannot marry.

In 1 Timothy 3 Paul outlines the qualifications for a bishop⁸. He writes, “If any one aspires to be a bishop, he desires a noble task. Now a bishop **must be** above reproach, **the husband of one wife**, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher...” and the list goes on. Now we’re at the crux of the matter. What does Paul mean when he says a man must be the husband of one wife? For our purposes here, we’ll only look at two of the possibilities⁹.

1. A man **must be (or have been) married** to be a bishop.
2. A man of **no more than one** wife can be a bishop.

In casually reading the passage the first option seems the most plausible. After all, later in the passage Paul speaks of how the children of the man must be well behaved, demonstrating that he can run a household well. But there is one additional bit of information that needs to be considered. And this additional fact reverses the reader’s first verdict and causes him ponder the question again. The reader must ask himself, “Who physically penned this instruction to Timothy?” The answer is Paul. And this fact casts the context into a different light.

We know that the apostle Paul was not a married man¹⁰. He was living proof that not having a wife (or children) did not disqualify a man from the priesthood or bishoprick. But to the quick of mind will come a fast retort. “Foul! Foul! Paul was an apostle, not a bishop. And Paul is writing about the qualifications of a bishop, not those of an apostle!” Actually he was both. And we know that because of a story in Acts chapter 1.

In Acts 1 the apostle Peter decides to replace Judas, one of the original 12 apostles. In justifying his decision he quotes an Old Testament passage which states, “his office let another take”. In some of the older English Bibles, specifically the Douay Rheims Catholic Bible and the King James Protestant Bible, the underlying Greek bleeds through a little clearer. They state, “his **bishoprick** let another take”. The underlying Greek word is “episkope”. It is used only 4 times in the New Testament. It is found here in Acts 1:20 and 1 Timothy 3:1 (the passage we are evaluating) where the word is translated “office of bishop”. In other words, the newest of the apostles, Matthias (chosen in Acts 1) was **both** numbered as an apostle¹¹ **and filling the office of bishop, the office vacated by Judas**. Therefore, by definition Paul too (as were all the apostles) was a holder of the office of bishop¹². While Paul was not married, he was qualified to be a bishop-apostle because (per 1 Timothy 3:2) he **had no more than one** wife, having never married.

In our next essay we will look at scriptural texts encouraging a celibate priesthood.

⁸ A similar list of qualifications can be found in Titus 1 for bishops and presbyters.

⁹ Beyond the obvious exclusion of polygamists, Protestants have disputed what the requirements actually are. Can a man remarry after his wife has died and still be considered the husband of “one” wife? Can a man remarry after a “valid” divorce (valid for Protestants)? Can a man remain a pastor after an invalid divorce, demonstrating he could not run his household well? And do his children have to be believers (a requirement in Titus 1). In reality, these requirements are being gradually discarded by evangelicals today.

¹⁰ Paul declares this in 1 Corinthians 7:7.

¹¹ The requirements for an apostle in Acts 1:20ff would be in addition to the requirements for a bishop.

¹² The apostles were also presbyters (priests). Peter refers to himself in 1 Peter 5:1 as a fellow presbyter.