

Holy Orders and Religious Life



RCIA Handouts:

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Why Celibacy for Priests?

By Msgr. Richard M. McGuinness and Rev. John A. Quill

Celibacy is the rule for priests in the Latin rite of the Catholic Church. This is so primarily because celibacy enables the priest to conform his life more closely to the life of the chaste, celibate Christ who invited those who would dedicate themselves totally to “the kingdom of heaven” to follow this way (Mt. 19:12).

Pope John Paul II reaffirms this in his apostolic exhortation, “The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World,” *Familiaris Consortio* (FC): “Virginité or celibacy, by liberating the human heart in a unique way, ‘so as to make it burn with greater love for God and all humanity,’ bears witness that the Kingdom of God and his justice is that pearl of great price which is preferred to every other value no matter how great, and hence must be sought as the only definitive value. It is for this reason that the Church, throughout her history, has always defended the superiority of this charism to that of marriage, by reason of the wholly singular link which it has with the Kingdom of God” (see no. 16).

Christ also stated that in heaven the children of the resurrection would not marry, but live as angels (see Lk. 20:35-36). Thus those who accept the invitation of Christ to lead a celibate life “for the sake of the kingdom” are better suited to anticipate and image the eternal life the just will enjoy on the Last Day at the heavenly nuptial (see Rev. 19:7-9).

Paul, himself a celibate, says in 1 Cor. 7:32-35: “An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord’s affairs, all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord ... In the same way an unmarried woman, like a young girl, can devote herself to the Lord’s affairs; all she need worry about is being holy in body and spirit ... I say this only to help you, not to put a halter around your necks, but simply to make sure that everything is as it should be, and that you give your undivided attention to the Lord.”

What Paul implies is that faithful celibates are not only more easily able to consecrate themselves fully to God, but also to all that pertains to this plan of salvation. Celibate priests, then, are freed to expend more time and energy in apostolic labors, something most of them would be unable to do as fully if they had to care for and support a wife and children. By being “full-time” in the service of God, the celibate priest is mystically wed to the Church, after the image of Christ the Bridegroom who is mystically wed to his Bride the Church – a union whose consummation will take place on the Last Day (see Eph. 5:21-33; also Rev. 19:7-9). By being the Church’s “groom,” the priest becomes the spiritual father of her members, both actual and potential. Pope John Paul emphasizes that: “the celibate person becomes spiritually fruitful, the father and mother of

many, cooperating in the realization of the family according to God's plan" (see FC no. 16).

The Church defined, at the twenty-fourth session of the Council of Trent in 1563, that celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom is superior to marriage as a state of life. In no way does this diminish the sanctity of marriage, which Christ made a sacrament. On the contrary, it exalts it all the more; for if marriage were not sacred, the Church would never make sacrificing it a condition for ordination to priesthood (and in the Eastern rites, to the episcopate). The Church calls a person to give up something good only for something that is better.

Some claim the Church is guilty of pride and inconsistency in declaring consecrated celibacy to be higher than marriage. Yet God in the Old Testament picked the Hebrews to be his Chosen People, dearer to Him than any other people on earth. They remained so in spite of their many infidelities. As a people, God never repudiated them; they were most special to Him, although He did not approve of their wrongdoings. With this in mind, we should see that while celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom is superior to marriage by divine choice, God in no way approves the infidelities of those celibates who violate their vows. In fact, there may very well be many married people who are closer to Him than many celibates who are unfaithful.

Let us be clear. The Church has never condemned marriage. Christ made it a sacrament; that is, a sign of his love for the Church and a means of salvation. The Church, beginning with Paul, has always rejected as false the views of those who condemned marriage and procreation (see 1 Tim. 3:4-5). The eleventh century heresy of Albigensianism (Cartharism) was roundly condemned principally for this reason.

Fidelity Necessary

Pope John Paul has urged fidelity on the part of priests and consecrated persons as a way of encouraging the married to be faithful: "Christian couples therefore have the right to expect from celibate persons a good example and a witness of fidelity to their vocation until death. Just as fidelity at times becomes difficult for married people and requires sacrifice, mortification and self-denial, the same can happen to celibate persons, and their fidelity, even in the trials that may occur, should strengthen the fidelity of married couples. These reflections on virginity or celibacy can enlighten and help those who, for reasons independent of their own will have been unable to marry and have then accepted their situation in a spirit of service" (FC, no. 16).

The Church sees celibacy as a God-given gift which benefits the Church and helps to bring about the Kingdom of God. She chooses as priests those who have this gift. A candidate for the priesthood has from four to eight years or more to determine if he has this gift and can live a celibate life.

Why Celibacy?

Our Lord was a priest (Heb. 4:14); He was also celibate and called others to do the same. “And Peter said, ‘Behold, we have left all and followed You.’ And He said to them, ‘Amen I say to you, there is no one who has left house, or parents, or brothers, or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive much more in the present time, and in the age to come life everlasting.” (Lk. 18:28-30) Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22); through celibacy the priest is called to sacrifice not just his son, but his wife. Our Lord teaches that not all can be celibate, but those who can should do so for the sake of the kingdom: “His disciples said to Him, ‘if the case of a man with his wife is so, it is not expedient to marry.’ And He said, “Not all can accept this teaching; but those to whom it has been given – there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let him accept it who can.” (Matt. 19:10-12) Celibacy is also a sign of the resurrection; we will all be celibate in the next world. Jesus says: “When people rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but live like angels in heaven.” (Matt. 22:30) In imitation of Christ the priest is called to live this way here and now in this world. Elijah and John the Baptist, the two great prophets of the Old Covenant, were celibate. St. Paul even encourages celibacy among the laity. He writes: “It is good for the man not to touch woman. Yet for fear of fornication, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband – For I wish that you all were like me; but each one has his own gift from God, one in this way, and another in that – Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be freed. Are you freed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you take a wife, you have not sinned. – He who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please God. Whereas he who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. (1 Cor. 7) A champion of celibacy for the priesthood, Vatican II said: “Perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven was recommended by Christ the Lord. This Sacred Council approves and confirms this legislation so far as it concerns those destined for the priesthood, and feels confident in the Spirit that the gift of celibacy, so appropriate to the priesthood of the New Testament, is liberally granted by the Father. And the more that perfect continence is considered by many people to be impossible in the world of today, so much the more humbly and perseveringly in union with the Church ought priests demand the grace of fidelity, which is never denied to those who ask.” Celibacy is not unnatural, it is supernatural. It is a special grace from God. Our Lord created manhood, and as a man he lived it fully and naturally, as a celibate male. Celibacy is a sacrifice of the good of marriage for the sake of the kingdom of God. It is not for men who have no attraction for women. It is for men who do like women. If they don’t then there is no sacrifice in giving up marriage. Celibacy is unpopular with the world today because it is a sacrifice, and sacrifice for God is not what a hedonistic culture wants. The opinions of this world do not worry Our Lord who said: “My kingdom is not of this world.” (Jn. 18:36)

Fr. Burke

Why Are There No Women Priests?

By Msgr. Richard M. McGuinness and Rev. John A. Quill

Never in her 2000 year history has the Catholic Church believed that a woman may become a priest or bishop. While many women were Christ's disciples, He never admitted them into the ranks of his Apostles, the first bishops.

During the first few centuries, some heretical groups, such as the Marcionites and Montanists, ordained women. This departure from Catholic tradition was roundly condemned by early Christian writers, such as St. Irenaeus (d. A.D. 202), the unknown authors of the *Didaskalia* (early third century A.D.) and the Apostolic Constitutions (c. A.D. 430), St. Epiphanius (d. A.D. 403), St. John Chrysostom (d. A.D. 407), St. Augustine (d. A.D. 430), and St. John Damascene (d. A.D. 749).

Caricatures of the Mass

The rites over which these "priestesses" presided were caricatures of the Mass. St. Epiphanius, in his work *Against Heresies*, writes: "It is reported that certain women there in Arabia ... have introduced this absurd teaching from Thracia: how they offer up a sacrifice of bread rolls in the name of the Ever Virginal (that is, of Mary) and hold their meetings in that very name, and how they undertake something that far exceeds proper measure in the name of the Holy Virgin. In an unlawful and blasphemous ceremony, they ordain women, through whom they offer up the sacrifice in the name of Mary. This means that the entire proceeding is godless and sacrilegious, a perversion of the message of the Holy Spirit; in fact, the whole thing is diabolical and a teaching of the impure spirit" (78,13).

In some places, especially in Syria, the Church allowed, for a time, deaconesses. In their rite of ordination, which accompanied a laying on of hands, the prayers were different from those in the rite of ordination of deacons. The deaconesses were entrusted with the anointing of female candidates prior to Baptism, the care of infirm women and visits to places where men were forbidden to enter. They were not permitted to serve at the altar nor could they preach, baptize, bless or distribute Communion under ordinary circumstances.

For modern advocates of female ordination to point to women priests in the early Church is to rest one's case on invalid ordinations carried out by heretical sects.

The abbess-deaconesses of fifth century Syria who, in the absence of a priest, distributed Communion to their nuns and to children, and who read the Epistle and Gospel at sacred ceremonies attended only by women, were not Catholic, but members of the heretical Monophysite Church. Even there, historical evidence demonstrates that every effort was made to keep them from serving at the altar.

The office of deaconess came into being in the East around the mid-third century and in the West about the fifth century. It became obsolete and soon disappeared when the number of adult baptisms, which had occasioned it, began to decline. It did not date back to Christ or to the Apostles.

Current advocates of women's ordination to the priesthood often state that Christ did not ordain women because He was sensitive to the social and cultural standards of his people and time. Yet Christ often went against the conventions of his day. For example, to the surprise of his disciples, He spoke with the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:27). He did not remark concerning the ritual impurity of the woman with hemorrhages (Mt. 9:20-22). He permitted the sinful woman in Lk. 7:36-50 to come near Him, anoint his feet and dry them with her hair, to the shock of Simon the Pharisee. He forgave the woman taken in adultery and let everyone know that her sin was no greater than that of her male consorts (Jn. 8:3-11). In Mt. 19:3-9 and Mk. 10:2-11, Christ put Himself in opposition to the Mosaic Law which permitted a man to divorce his wife and marry another but did not extend this permission to the woman. In restoring marriage to his Father's original plan, as expressed in Gen. 2 and 3, Christ declared both the woman and the man who divorce and remarry, equally guilty of adultery.

Women Disciples

That women accompanied Christ during his ministry is evident from Lk. 8:2-3. Although Jewish custom backed by Jewish law did not attach much importance to a woman's testimony, Christ allowed women to be the first to see Him after his Resurrection and to them He entrusted the duty of informing the Apostles so that the latter might become the official witnesses of this glorious event (Mt. 28:1-10; Lk. 24:1-24; Jn. 20:1-18).

There is even more evidence that Christ was unafraid to go against the established ways of the Mosaic Law and practice. For example, He let his hungry disciples pluck grain on a Sabbath, and He cured on a Sabbath (Mt. 12:1-14; Mk. 2:23-3:6). He cast aside the Mosaic distinction between clean and unclean foods and criticized ritual purifications (Mk. 7:1-19). Through the authority He gave his Apostles, Christ, who rose from the dead on a Sunday, transferred Sabbath observance from Saturday to Sunday (Acts 20:7; Col. 2:16). He substituted Baptism for circumcision (Mt. 28:19; Gal. 5:2). His perfect sacrifice on the cross, which won our redemption, replaced the many ineffectual animal sacrifices of the Old Law (Heb. 10:1-18). He replaced the Levitical priesthood, based on carnal lineage, with his eternal priesthood (Heb. 7). In fact, Christ took away the Old Law, making Himself the New (Gal. 3:24-26; Heb. 7:18-19).

Now, even with all these changes, some of which were radical departures from accepted Jewish law and cult, never did He choose a woman as an Apostle nor say that it would be all right for his Church to do so. His own Mother Mary was

never a priest, and if there were ever a person, male or female, truly deserving of this role, it certainly was she. St. Epiphanius elaborates on this saying: “If women were to be charged by God with entering the priesthood or with assuming ecclesiastical office, then in the New Covenant it would have devolved upon no one more worthy than Mary to fulfill a priestly function. She was invested with so great an honor as to be allowed to provide a dwelling in her womb for the heavenly God and King of all things, the Son of God ... But he did not find this (the conferring of priesthood) good. Not even baptizing was entrusted to her; otherwise, Christ could better have been baptized by her than by John” (*Against Heresies*, 79,3).

When the Apostles went preaching in the Gentile world, they continued to have women in their company who worked with them (Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:2-3). But none was chosen to become a bishop or priest. When a successor to Judas Iscariot was selected, the lots fell on a man, Matthias, and not a woman (Acts 1:15-26).

The Apostles Never Ordained Women

Even though the Gentiles were used to priestesses in their pagan cults and might have accepted Christian ones, the Apostles never ordained women.

Perhaps the most decisive argument in Scripture against the ordaining of women is found in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:12. In both passages, St. Paul forbids women to speak in liturgical assemblies as official voices of the Church. The implication is that this office of official teacher or preacher of the faith is reserved for men, especially the bishop who has received the fullness of the Christian priesthood. Paul bases this prohibition on what he believes is the original plan of God for the sexes (Gen. 2:18-24; 1 Cor. 11:15). He does, however, allow women to prophesy in the assembly (1 Cor. 11:5).

St. Paul says, in 2 Cor. 5:18-20, that those who, like himself, exercise the apostolic ministry “are ambassadors of Christ ... God ... appealing through us.” They represent Christ as his other selves. In Gal. 4:14, Paul makes it more emphatic: “Instead you welcome me as an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus Himself.”

On the basis of this Pauline theology of representation, the Church deepened her understanding of the role of priest and bishop. The bishop and priest act not only in the name or in the place of Christ, but in his very person. This is maximally carried out in the Mass when the priest says the words of consecration: “This is my Body ... This is the cup of my Blood.”

Every Mass is offered, then, by Christ, the Eternal High Priest, in and through his ordained priest. The priest must be, therefore, a sensible sign of the One in whose person he acts. Just as a ruby cannot signify a diamond, neither can a

woman be the natural sign of a man. Christ's maleness is not incidental. Since he was, still is and always will be a man (united to the Person of the Son of God), it would be incongruous for a woman to celebrate the memorial of his Paschal Mystery. She could not act in his person, imaging his male body and saying, at the altar, "This is my Body."

Each Has its Role

Some argue that the sex of the priest is as immaterial as his race or nationality. This is not true, since both sexes, with their differences and their respective roles in the order of creation and redemption were willed by God from the beginning. "Male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). Men and women are both made in the image and likeness of God. But they image God in a complimentary, not identical way. Sex is more constitutive of a person's humanity than race or ethnicity, for it deals with marriage and family.

Others argue that because Gal. 3:28 says there is in Christ no distinction between man and woman, there is no reason to limit priesthood to men. The commentary on the Declaration of the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood issued October 15, 1976, by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addresses this: "For St. Paul this is the effect of Baptism ... But absolute equality in baptismal life is quite a different thing from the structure of the ordained ministry. This latter is the object of a vocation within the Church, not a right inherent in the person."

Thus, no one has a right to the priesthood, whether man or woman. God chooses those whom He wishes (Mk. 3:13).

Men and women are equally human and precious in the eyes of God. The question of ordination is one of divinely designated roles which the Church is obligated to maintain. A statement issued by Archbishop (now Cardinal) Joseph L. Bernardin, then President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, on October 3, 1975, declares: "It would be a mistake ... to reduce the question of ordination of women to one of injustice, as is done at times. It would be correct to do this only if ordination were a God-given right of every individual; only if somehow one's human potential could not be fulfilled without it. In fact, however, no one, male or female, can claim a 'right' to ordination. And, since the episcopal and priestly office is basically a ministry of service, ordination in no way 'completes' one's humanity."

In a homily on October 4, 1979, at the Civic Center in Philadelphia, Pope John Paul II stated: "The fact that there is a personal individual call to the priesthood given by the Lord to 'the men he himself had decided on' is in accord with the prophetic tradition. It should help us, too, to understand that the Church's traditional decision to call men to the priesthood, and not to call women, is not a statement about human rights, nor an exclusion of women from holiness and

mission in the Church. Rather this decision expresses the conviction of the Church about this particular dimension of the gift of priesthood by which God has chosen to shepherd his flock.”