

## The Case for Priestly Celibacy: Part II

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In our first essay we established that priestly celibacy is a discipline of the Church rather than a dogma. Further, celibacy is a discipline most closely adhered to in the Roman rite of the Catholic Church, as opposed to the eastern or Byzantine rites of the Catholic Church. But while we've established that the scriptures do not require marriage for the priesthood, why has the Church decreed to keep the vast majority of her Roman rite priests celibate? To answer this question we will now turn to the scriptures.

To begin with, the Apostle Paul speaks of certain advantages to a celibate vocation. In writing about the matter of marriage in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, Paul states that he had chosen a celibate life and that he wishes all lived as he. But then he makes a concession as to how God has ordered things. Paul writes, “**But** each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another”. Paul acknowledges two special gifts from God. **One special gift** is a call to the married life. **Another special gift** is a call to the celibate life. For our purposes here, we can see that God has called certain men and women to a role that differs from the married life. This is important as we begin to form our thinking about the celibate priesthood.

Later in the same chapter Paul offers his advice<sup>1</sup> about seeking marriage in light of an impending distress<sup>2</sup>. In verse 32 Paul writes, “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.**” In reading 1 Corinthians 7 we can conclude two things about our topic. First, some people have been given a gift of celibacy. Secondly, those serving the Lord in celibacy are more prone to have undivided interests.

In Matthew 19 Christ teaches that divorce was allowed in the Old Testament because of the hardness of people's hearts. But this Mosaic allowance was to be done away with in the New Testament era. The disciples retort by saying, “if that's the case it's better not to marry at all!” Accidentally, the disciples **sort of** got it right. Christ does not totally disregard their hyperbolic objection. Instead he hinges a new teaching on it. He declares that only some people can accept this statement about lifetime celibacy (not marrying). He goes on to say there is a new type of eunuch “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”. Now all eunuchs are by definition men<sup>3</sup> who have made “a lifetime commitment” through mutilation. But Christ anticipated a group of men who, not because of a birth defect or as the result of a mutilation, will voluntarily elect to take a vow of lifetime celibacy in the service of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Verses 25 – 40 are still to be viewed as the Word of God. Paul's penned opinions are God speaking through divine scripture. The advice of Paul is in fact the advice of God.

<sup>2</sup> Paul may be speaking of persecution the Corinthians had to endure or it may be taken as a general reference to the hardships of life this side of heaven.

<sup>3</sup> While the analogy of eunuchs most closely relates to men, it certainly applies to women who have taken a vow of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God.

In 2 Timothy, Paul instructs Timothy (whom he calls a soldier) to entrust the deposit of faith to other men, describing the kind of soldiers he wants. In verse 4 of chapter 2 Paul states, “No soldier of service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him”. In other words, God wants men who have **his undivided attention** so that they can commit all their energy and focus to serving him. And we already know that it is the unmarried man that *more easily* gives the Lord his undivided attention. The Catholic Church has elected to call her priests from the ranks of such men.

But some will still protest that the celibate priesthood is a doctrine of demons. This concern comes from 1 Timothy chapter 4 where demonic doctrines are listed. Included on this list are “those who forbid marriage” amongst other things. Three things can be said in response. First of all, nobody requires a man to be a priest. The priesthood is an entirely voluntary vocation. Secondly, we have already shown how the Church does allow for married priests. Thirdly, in the next chapter of 1 Timothy we find an example of Paul forbidding marriage in certain circumstances. That being the case, **voluntary** vows of celibacy cannot be a doctrine of demons. Let’s briefly examine this passage.

Starting in chapter 5, verse 9 Paul talks about the “enrollment of widows”. Most Protestants think of this as the church welfare rolls where older widows were financially supported. But look more closely. These women must be over the age of 60 and **have taken a voluntary vow not to remarry** (verse 12). If after being enrolled they do remarry, it is because (Paul states) they “grow wanton against Christ” and “they incur condemnation, having violated their first **pledge**”<sup>4</sup>. But Paul is not casting off widows in general to fend for themselves<sup>5</sup>. Instead he is talking about widows who qualify to be “enrolled”. Widows open to a future marriage were not to be put on the rolls. This sounds strange to Protestant ears. Why the qualifications? Catholics recognize the enrolled widows as an embryonic order of nuns<sup>6</sup>; women that have presumably taken vows of celibacy in order to better serve the Lord. Why else the vows<sup>7</sup>? Once enrolled, the women continue their lives of prayer and service in return for financial support from the Church (much like our priests). Therefore, Paul can **require pledges** of celibacy for enrollment and not be invoking a “doctrines of demons”. So too with the priesthood.

Sacred scripture tells us that the unmarried man is better able to serve the Lord. Further, Christ anticipates a class of men who will voluntarily make commitments of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God. Finally, Paul writes that he wants men with undivided interests serving as soldiers for Christ. In her wisdom, Mother Church has listened to the council of scripture and opted to gather her priests from such men. **This is not a doctrine of demons**. Our priests have been granted a grace and have taken a vow for the love of God and his kingdom. While the no Protestant church has such a group of men<sup>8</sup>, we can be thankful that the Catholic Church, in listening to her master’s voice, does.

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<sup>4</sup> “Their first pledge” is not a reference to their Christian faith, as remarrying in widowhood does not violate the Christian faith. The pledge was to not remarry. Remarrying would violate that pledge.

<sup>5</sup> See James 1:27 & 2:15,16. True faith is described as caring for widows & Christians in need of food & clothing. Christians who led a less than saintly life or made bad judgments are not banned from our care.

<sup>6</sup> All orders of nuns have a list of qualifications & requirements for joining. This group had an age criteria.

<sup>7</sup> This was not a vows for food program.

<sup>8</sup> It is possible individual Protestants live this out, but not as the result of a denomination’s teaching.