

Fundamentalist attacks on priestly celibacy come in a number of different forms—not all compatible with one another. There is almost no other subject about which so many *different* confusions exist.

The first and most basic confusion is thinking of priestly celibacy as a dogma or doctrine—a central and irreformable part of the faith, believed by Catholics to come from Jesus and the apostles. Thus some Fundamentalists make a great deal of a biblical reference to Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:30), apparently supposing that, if Catholics only knew that Peter had been married, they would be unable to regard him as the first pope. Again, Fundamentalist time lines of “Catholic inventions” (a popular literary form) assign “mandatory priestly celibacy” to this or that year in Church history, as if prior to this requirement the Church could not have been Catholic.

These Fundamentalists are often surprised to learn that even today celibacy is not the rule for all Catholic priests. In fact, for Eastern Rite Catholics, married priests are the *norm*, just as they are for Orthodox and Oriental Christians.

Even in the Eastern churches, though, there have always been some restrictions on marriage and ordination. Although married men may become priests, unmarried priests may not marry, and married priests, if widowed, may not remarry. Moreover, there is an ancient Eastern discipline of choosing bishops from the ranks of the celibate monks, so their bishops are all unmarried.

The tradition in the Western or Latin-Rite Church has been for priests as well as bishops to take vows of celibacy, a rule that has been firmly in place since the early Middle Ages. Even today, though, exceptions are made. For example, there are married Latin-Rite priests who are converts from Lutheranism and Episcopalianism.

As these variations and exceptions indicate, priestly celibacy is not an unchangeable dogma, like the Trinity, but a disciplinary rule, like requiring clergy to have formal theological education (a discipline followed in most non-Catholic churches). The fact that Peter was married is no more contrary to the

Catholic faith than the fact that the pastor of the nearest Maronite Catholic church is married.

### IS MARRIAGE MANDATORY?

Another, quite different Fundamentalist confusion is the notion that celibacy is unbiblical, or even “unnatural.” Every man, it is claimed, must obey the biblical injunction to “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28); and Paul commands that “each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2). It is even argued that celibacy somehow “causes,” or at least correlates with higher incidence of, illicit sexual behavior or perversion.

All of this is false. Although most people are at some point in their lives called to the married state, the vocation of celibacy is explicitly advocated—as well as practiced—by both Jesus and Paul.

So far from “commanding” marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, in that very chapter Paul actually endorses celibacy for those capable of it: “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (7:8-9).

It is only because of this “temptation to immorality” (7:2) that Paul gives the teaching about each man and woman having a spouse and giving each other their “conjugal rights” (7:3); he specifically clarifies, “I say this *by way of concession, not of command*. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another” (7:6-7, emphasis added).

Paul even goes on to make a case for *preferring* celibacy to marriage: “Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. . . those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. . . 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. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to

please her husband” (7:27-34).

Paul’s conclusion: He who marries “does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better” (7:38).

Paul was not the first apostle to conclude that celibacy is, in some sense, “better” than marriage. After Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19 on divorce and remarriage, the disciples exclaimed, “If such is the case between a man and his wife, it is better not to marry” (Matt 19:10). This remark prompted Jesus’ teaching on the value of celibacy “for the sake of the kingdom”:

“Not all can accept this word, but only those to whom it is granted. Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of God. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it” (Matt. 19:11–12).

Notice that this sort of celibacy “for the sake of the kingdom” is a gift, a call that is not granted to all, or even most people, but is granted to some. Other people are called to marriage. It is true that too often individuals in both vocations fall short of the requirements of their state, but this does not diminish either vocation, nor does it mean that the individuals in question were “not really called” to that vocation. The sin of a priest doesn’t necessarily prove that he never should have taken a vow of celibacy, any more than the sin of a married man or woman proves that he or she never should have gotten married. It is possible for us to fall short of our own true calling.

Celibacy is neither unnatural nor unbiblical. “Be fruitful and multiply” is not binding upon every individual; rather, it is a general precept for the human race. Otherwise, every unmarried man and woman of marrying age would be in a state of sin by remaining single, and Jesus and Paul would be guilty of advocating sin as well as committing it.

### “THE HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE”

Another Fundamentalist argument, related to the

last, is that marriage is mandatory *for Church leaders*. For Paul says a bishop must be “the husband of one wife,” and “must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God’s Church?” (1 Tim. 3:2, 4–5). This means, they argue, that only a man who has demonstrably looked after a family is fit to care for God’s Church; an unmarried man, it is implied, is somehow untried or unproven.

This interpretation leads to obvious absurdities. For one, if “the husband of one wife” really meant that a bishop *had* to be married, then by the same logic “keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way” would mean that he *had* to have children. Childless husbands (or even fathers of only *one* child, since Paul uses the plural) would not qualify.

In fact, following this style of interpretation to its final absurdity, since Paul speaks of bishops meeting these requirements (not of their *having met* them, or of *candidates* for bishop meeting them), it would even follow that an ordained bishop whose wife or children died would become unqualified for ministry! Clearly such excessive literalism must be rejected.

The theory that Church leaders must be married also contradicts the obvious fact that Paul himself, an eminent Church leader, was single and happy to be so. Unless Paul was a hypocrite, he could hardly have imposed a requirement on bishops which he did not himself meet. Consider, too, the implications regarding Paul’s positive attitude toward celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7: the married have worldly anxieties and divided interests, yet *only* they are qualified to be bishops; whereas the unmarried have single-minded devotion to the Lord, yet are barred from ministry!

The suggestion that the unmarried man is somehow untried or unproven is equally absurd. Each vocation has its own proper challenges: the celibate man must exercise “self-control” (1 Cor. 7:9); the husband must love and care for his wife selflessly

(Eph. 5:25); and the father must raise his children well (1 Tim. 3:4). *Every* man must meet Paul's standard of "managing his household well," even if his "household" is only himself. If anything, the chaste celibate man meets a *higher* standard than the respectable family man.

Clearly, the point of Paul's requirement that a bishop be "the husband of one wife" is not that he *must* have one wife, but that he must have *only* one wife. Expressed conversely, Paul is saying that a bishop must *not* have unruly or undisciplined children (not that he *must* have children who are well behaved), and must not be married *more than once* (not that he must be married).

The truth is, it is precisely those who are uniquely "concerned about the affairs of the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:32), those to whom it has been given to "renounce marriage for the sake of the kingdom" (Matt. 19:12), who are ideally suited to follow in the footsteps of those who have "left everything" to follow Christ (cf. Matt. 19:27)—the calling of the clergy and consecrated religious (i.e., monks and nuns).

Thus Paul warned Timothy, a young bishop, that those called to be "soldiers" of Christ must avoid "civilian pursuits": "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him" (2 Tim. 2:3-4). In light of Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 7 about the advantages of celibacy, marriage and family clearly stand out in connection with these "civilian pursuits."

An example of ministerial celibacy can also be seen in the Old Testament. The prophet Jeremiah, as part of his prophetic ministry, was forbidden to take a wife: "The word of the Lord came to me: 'You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place'" (Jer. 16:1-2). Of course, this is different from Catholic priestly celibacy, which is not divinely ordained; yet the divine precedent still supports the legitimacy of the human institution.

### FORBIDDEN TO MARRY?

Yet none of these passages give us an example of hu-

manly mandated celibacy. Jeremiah's celibacy was mandatory, but it was from the Lord. Paul's remark to Timothy about "civilian pursuits" is only a general admonition, not a specific command; and even in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul qualifies his strong endorsement of celibacy by adding: "I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord" (7:35).

This brings us to Fundamentalism's last line of attack: that, by *requiring* at least some of its clerics and its religious not to marry, the Catholic Church falls under Paul's condemnation in 1 Timothy 4:3 against apostates who "forbid marriage."

In fact, the Catholic Church forbids no one to marry. No one is required to take a vow of celibacy; those who do, do so voluntarily. They "renounce marriage" (Matt. 19:12); no one forbids it to them. Any Catholic who doesn't wish to take such a vow doesn't have to, and is almost always free to marry with the Church's blessing. The Church simply elects candidates for the priesthood (or, in the Eastern rites, for the episcopacy) from among those who voluntarily renounce marriage.

But is there scriptural precedent for this practice of restricting membership in a group to those who take a voluntary vow of celibacy? Yes. Paul, writing once again to Timothy, mentions an order of widows pledged not to remarry (1 Tim 5:9-16); in particular advising: "But refuse to enroll younger widows; for when they grow wanton against Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge" (5:11-12).

This "first pledge" broken by remarriage cannot refer to previous wedding vows, for Paul does not condemn widows for remarrying (cf. Rom. 7:2-3). It can only refer to a *vow not to remarry* taken by widows enrolled in this group. In effect, they were an early form of women religious—New Testament nuns. The New Testament Church *did* contain orders with mandatory celibacy, just as the Catholic Church does today.

Such orders are not, then, what Paul meant when he warned against "forbidding to marry." The real

culprits here are the many Gnostic sects through the ages which denounced marriage, sex, and the body as intrinsically evil. Some early heretics fit this description, as did the medieval Albigensians and Catharists (whom, ironically, some anti-Catholic writers admire in ignorance, apparently purely because they happened to have insisted on using their own vernacular translation of the Bible; see the Catholic Answers tract *Catholic Inventions*).

### THE DIGNITY OF CELIBACY AND MARRIAGE

Most Catholics marry, and all Catholics are taught to venerate marriage as a holy institution—a sacrament, an action of God upon our souls; one of the holiest things we encounter in this life.

In fact, it is precisely the holiness of marriage that makes celibacy precious; for only what is good and holy in itself can be given up for God as a sacrifice. Just as fasting presupposes the goodness of food, celibacy presupposes the goodness of marriage. To despise celibacy, therefore, is to undermine marriage itself—as the early Fathers pointed out.

Celibacy is also a life-affirming institution. In the Old Testament, where celibacy was almost unknown, the childless were often despised by others and themselves; only through children, it was felt, did one acquire value. By renouncing marriage, the celibate affirms the intrinsic value of each human life in itself, regardless of offspring.

Finally, celibacy is an eschatological sign to the Church, a living-out in the present of the universal celibacy of heaven: "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30).

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