

Mandatory Celibacy and the Priesthood

Prepared by the Voice of Renewal/Lay Education National Working Group

Old Testament Background

Genesis 1:28a: “*And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’.*”

This is one of God’s foundational commandments, which all Jews (and Judaeo-Christians) are to follow according to Old Testament Scripture (i.e., they are to marry and have children for purposes of fulfilling God’s commandment based on the creation directives).

Only much later, during the intertestamental period, did exceptional communities arise (e.g., Pagan cults, the Essenes, the Therapeutae – at Qumran) which practiced celibacy.¹

The Nature of Christian Discipleship According to Jesus

1. Jesus only called certain people to be his disciples. On the other hand, Jesus did not make discipleship or following him a precondition to be part of the reign of God.²
2. According to the four gospels, there were several different levels of fellowship with Jesus. However, it is possible to see this fellowship divided into more or less three distinct relational groups: 1) ***the twelve***, also equated with the ***apostles***; 2) the ***disciples***, including the twelve and other immediate disciples (Luke 10:1 sends out “seventy others” who were disciples); and 3) ***the people***, probably all Jews, who gave a positive response to Jesus’ message.³
3. The individual distinctions among the three groups (***apostle***, ***disciple***, and ***the people***) are significant, but the radical nature of discipleship is really about the establishment of a new standard for all the people of Israel (see both Luke and Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount). There were not two different ethics at work then: One of perfection for the apostles, and one of a less standard for the rest. All are being called to this higher standard of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

¹ Dan Harrington, S.J. and James Keenan, S.J., “Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology, (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2002), p.165.

² Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church: Toward a Theology of the People of God*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p.165.

³ *Ibid.*, 167.

New Testament Evidence

1. Nowhere in the gospels does Jesus speak of celibacy as a requirement to become a disciple. In fact, *Matthew 19* is the only gospel reference where Jesus speaks directly on the issue of celibacy; and here he speaks of it as an exception.
2. Jesus first states that Genesis 1:28 is a command given by God that is not to be violated (Matthew 19:4-6). Jesus believes that men and women were primarily created by God to marry and must not divorce one another (except for infidelity). In response to further questioning about being celibate, Jesus states that this condition of life is for “**only those to whom it is given,**” i.e. only those who have been given this gift by God. But in Matthew 19:12, which is unique to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus declares that the unmarried state is found both naturally at birth (12a) as well as a state which can be successfully achieved “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” This is a difficult teaching of Jesus’ for the disciples to understand or accept, but it is only for those “able to receive” it (12d). **Note: Jesus was not mandating celibacy here for his disciples to follow.**
3. In both St. Paul’s writings (i.e., 1 Cor.7) and the early New Testament period in general, the practice and understanding of celibacy is presented as a response to the Parousia, which was believed to have begun. Celibacy is not mandated; but is only to be undertaken only by those who have received this gift and calling, and then only to be fulfilled for the “kingdom of heaven.” The eschatological kingdom of God was believed to be imminent.

Early and Later Church History:

1. The notion of not being able to celebrate Eucharist because there was no appointed leader was unthinkable in the early church, because the priesthood of Jesus resided in the whole people. In the New Testament, the notion of priest is applied to Christ and to the whole body of those baptized into Christ. It is important to remember that there was as yet no conferring of any special authorization or sacred power to preside at Eucharist. It is the community that is the subject of the Eucharistic action. The presiders were the bishops or presbyters, or, in the words of Clement (the 2nd century bishop of Rome), **other eminent members with the approval of the whole church**, (that is, non-priests). Tertullian, in the 3rd century, echoed Clement’s statement by declaring: Where no college of ministers has been appointed, you, the laity, must celebrate the Eucharist and baptize; in that case you are your own priests, for where two or three are gathered together, there is the church, even if these three are lay people.
2. In the 3rd century, Cyprian is the first who calls the bishop a priest, saying that in virtue of his presiding over the community and therefore its celebration of Eucharist, he is standing in the place of Jesus, the priest. In time, presbyters were also referred to as priests, since they often were the presiders in small communities. So the connection was made between priest and Eucharist. This was the beginning of a distinction made between clergy and laity. The distinction evolved until Augustine, the 5th century Bishop of Hippo, disapproved of lay people as Eucharistic presiders.

3. The origin of what we know today as the diocesan or parish priest began in the 4th century with the practice of bishops sending someone to the surrounding rural areas to preside at a Eucharist. This furthered the association of priest with the cult (ritual worship), especially Eucharist. There were both married and celibate priests at this time, but what slowly evolved over the next seven centuries was a connection between holiness and ritual purity laws, including the requirement of abstinence from sexual intercourse the night before officiating at worship. The cultural context for this was not gospel-based; it stemmed from a negative view of sexuality held by some in the Greco-Roman world. With daily celebration of Eucharist becoming the norm, abstinence before the liturgy became problematic. Eventually in the 12th century, mandatory celibacy for priests became Church law. A fringe benefit of a celibate clergy was that it was easier to maintain ownership of Church property, which would otherwise pass to the heirs of a married cleric. This was important in the ongoing Church struggle to maintain an independent identity from the Empire.
4. The Roman Catholic Church has maintained the theological and pastoral significance of celibacy and the priesthood despite problems associated with this practice. In the Vatican II documents, *Presbyterorum ordinis* (article 16), written in the 1960s, the Council reaffirmed the importance of celibacy and the priesthood after considerable discussion. It was reaffirmed as part of a long tradition that is highly esteemed as a special “*feature of priestly life*” leading to a “*spiritual fruitfulness*” in the world.⁴ It is a foretaste of the later promise of the Church’s mystical union with Christ in heaven.⁵
5. According to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, celibacy is a mandatory requirement for *all* men who wish to become priests. The only exception is for former Protestant clergymen who are already married but then become Catholic priests. Rationale for this mandatory requirement of celibacy was so that all priests can possess an “*undivided heart*,” allowing them to “*dedicate themselves more freely*” in service to God and humanity.⁶
6. A new positive focus on celibacy has been written into the Canon and the conciliar teaching, which reveals a great improvement over previous presentations. “*All untenable motives for celibacy*,” e.g., the need for cultic purity or speaking negatively about the body or human sexuality has been eliminated from both texts.⁷ This eliminates any confusion over declaring the celibate life superior or more Holy than married life, since celibacy “*is not demanded of the priesthood by its nature*.” Both the early Church and the tradition of the Eastern churches have had “*many excellent married priests*.” Therefore, the Council “*exhorts*” all married priests to continue in the married state and persevere in their Holy vocation for those whom they serve.⁸

⁴ Austin Flannery, O. P., “Vatican Council II: Volume 1,” (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1998), p.892

⁵ Ibid. p.893.

⁶ John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green, “New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law,” (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), p.357.

⁷ Ibid. p.357.

⁸ Flannery, p.892.

Bibliography

Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, pp. 85-94.

Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry*, NY: Crossroad, 1985, pp. 240-258.

Donald Cozzens, *Freeing Celibacy*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 31-41.

David Gibson, *The Coming Catholic Church*, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, pp. 246-270.

Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity*, NY: Continuum, 2003, pp. 72-75.