

Married Catholic Priests: The Historical Record

A. Scriptural Texts.

1. “Now Simon’s mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him of her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up and the fever left her; and she served them.” Mk 1:30-3
2. “Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brethren of the Lord and Cephas.” I Tim 9: 5
3. “Let deacons be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their households well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great confidence in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.” I Tim 3: 12-13
4. “This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you, if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate. For a bishop, as God’s steward, must be blameless.” Tit 1: 5-7

B. Early Church.

1. III Century

“When receiving ordination and being placed in the episcopacy, the man should be examined: whether he is respectful, faithful, and honest; whether he has or has had a modest and faithful wife; whether he has educated his children devoutly, brought them up in the discipline of the Lord, and led them to virtue.” Apostolic Constitutions, II, 2 (PG 1, 598)

2. III Century

“It is fitting that the bishop be a man of one wife, and a good caretaker of his household. When he receives the imposition of hands and is ordained to the episcopacy, let him be examined: whether he is chaste, and has or has had a faithful and

chaste wife; whether he has educated and admonished his children wisely; and whether members of his household revere, honor and obey him. For if his own children plot against him and disobey, what of those outside his household?” Didascalia Apostolorum, IV

C. Early Papal Witness.

It is estimated that there were 39 married popes. Among them are sons of priests, like Agapitus I (535-36), Marinus I (882-84), Boniface VI (896), and John XV (985-86); the son of a bishop: Theodore I (642-49); and sons of popes: Silverius (536-37) son of Hormisdas (514-23), and John XI (931-35) son of Sergius III (904-11).

D. Eastern Church Witness.

The eastern Branch of the Catholic Church did not agree with the growing mandates of the Western Branch of the Catholic Church. At the Council of Trullo in 692, Eastern bishops decreed: “Since we know it to be handed down as a rule of the Roman Church that those deemed worthy to be advanced to the diaconate or presbyterate should promise no longer to cohabit with their wives, we preserving the ancient rule and apostolic perfection and order, will that the lawful marriages of men who are in holy orders be from this time forward firm, by no means dissolving their union with their wives, nor depriving them of mutual intercourse at convenient times.”

E. Later Papal Witness

In the second millennium, several Popes who fathered children held the papal throne. These include Clement IV (1265-68) who was a widower with two daughters, Innocent VIII (1484-92) the father of three illegitimate children before ordination, Alexander VI (1492-1503) who fathered children both before and after election to the papacy, Julius II (1503-13) who fathered three daughters as cardinal, Paul III (1534-49) who fathered four children before ordination, Pius IV (1559-65) who begot children before receiving orders, and Gregory XIII (1572-85) who had four sons.

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F. Deliberations during the Second Vatican Council.

Many Council Fathers prepared interventions on the issue of priestly celibacy and marriage. Not all were given publicly.

1. Maximos IV Saigh, Patriarch of the Melkite Catholic Church: "When you praise the beauty of a celibate priesthood, you must not destroy or disregard the parallel and likewise apostolic tradition of a clergy that has taken upon itself the bond of a holy marriage. . . . Neither Scripture nor Tradition, especially that of the first centuries, do regard celibacy as an indispensable condition for priesthood."
2. Bp. Koop, a missionary bishop in Brazil: "I want to start with a clear announcement that, to save the Catholic Church in Latin America, a married clergy has to be accepted as soon as possible. . . . I therefore propose that the Council considers ordaining qualified laymen who have been married at least five years. That solution also exists in the Orthodox Churches, which have at their disposal dignified and apostolic priests. Their matrimony, their exemplary life and their socioeconomic status will undoubtedly contribute to the effectiveness of their ministry."
3. Cardinal Suenens of Belgium: "I made several statements, the most important of which was a request that those episcopal conferences that might wish to do so — and this was not the case in my country — should be allowed to open the priesthood to married men, in circumstances which would have to be defined. What I was seeking was in fact to open up the possibility of a double clergy, the one celibate and the other married — such as we now have in the Catholic Church of the Eastern Rite and such as existed for several centuries."
4. Theo Van Asten, general superior of the White Fathers: "How is it that a church that requires from a priest not to enter into matrimony does not demand that they decline dignities and titles, ecclesiastical ones included? And why does it not require from its priests that they abstain from seeking after worldly riches? What can be the significance of somebody who pretends to be a celibate devoted to God, and who does not abstain from wealth, ambition and dignities? Could care of children and love for a woman be more dangerous for a priest than riches and smelling incense?"
5. Bp. Jan van Cauwelaert of Belgium: "The shortage of priests in the young churches in Africa will not be met by an increase of celibate priests which in practice can never be materialized. All bishops will confirm the impossibility of sending celibates to remote villages to reside there isolated and alone. It cannot be solved either by importing expatriate priests, because they are not able to be the real leaders of those communities. All bishops of Africa and many bishops of Asia demand that their catechists be married men. Now these catechists are already in charge of every priestly function, except Eucharist and Confession."

G. After the Council.

The refrain regarding married priesthood continued.

1. Cardinal Michele Pellegrino of Turin in April 1981: "Confronted with this dilemma: either at any cost maintaining the law of celibacy in the present rigor, and in consequence renouncing a full evangelization, or promoting a full evangelization, which requires Eucharist, and therefore changing the law of celibacy, I believe that we have to choose this way."
2. Archbishop Luciano Mendez de Alameda of Mariana in Brazil in June 1987: "The Church cannot escape considering the fact of a massive departure of priests as a sign of the times, which has to be interpreted in the light of God's Spirit rather than in the light of canon law. . . . Seen from a merely human point of view, the fact that the Church does not want to accept the services of married priests, in whom she has invested so much

The Historical Record

education, appears to be nonsense. From a pastoral point of view, and given the chronic shortage of priests, it seems an even greater absurdity to regard all married priests as suspect and not to make use of their skills and strengths, when they pronounce themselves ready to serve.”

3. Bp. Jacques Gaillot of Evroux in October 1988: “Why not grant the dispensation from celibacy to priests who ask for it, along with the desire to stay in communion with the Church? How long shall we deprive ourselves of the service of those married priests who remain prepared for service in the church? Why do we close our eyes to pastoral situations where the lack of priests is felt like a cry? . . . The absence of priests has the effect of canceling out in the faithful’s minds the knowledge of how significant ordained ministry is in its symbolic and structural value for the Church. Can we continue any longer to administer the shortage, find solutions of delay, instead of doing justice to the needs of the People of God?”

4. Bp. Pascasio Rettler OFM of Bacabal in Brazil in January 1989: “I have not yet lost the hope that one day married men will be ordained, especially to serve small communities. In our diocese we have more than 500 leaders of such communities, many known to me for twenty years. I should not hesitate to ordain them, so that the right of the Eucharist for all baptized

Christians might be assured. . . And how much do we need those married priests who remain faithful to the Church in their belief and their love — and there are thousands of them.”

5. Bp. Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee said in July 1991: “Across the board celibacy works to our detriment as a Church. Men who leave the priesthood because of the loneliness are not weak. They are simply good men who have fallen in love with good women.”

H. The Third Millennium.

The refrain continues.

1. Archbishop Keith O’Brien of St. Andrews and Edinburgh declared in April 2002: “I have no problems with celibacy withering away. There is no theological problem with it ending. The loss of celibacy would give liberty to priests to exercise their God-given gift of love and sex rather than feeling they must be celibate all their lives.” And in May 2005 he reiterated the same: “Having seen something of the apostolate of married deacons, I can foresee the day when there will be married priests.”

2. Bp. Pat Power of Canberra-Goalburn in Australia in September 2002 said: “Celibacy is something that needs to be looked at. One of the things I have especially suggested is that those priests who have left the active min-

istry and marry, that consideration be given to allowing these men to exercise priestly ministry.

3. Bp. Nicholas Samra of the Melkite Eparchy of Newton Massachusetts announced in November 2011 that the Melkite Catholic Church would begin ordaining married men to the priesthood in the US. He said: “God calls men and women to religious vocations. And I believe he also calls married men to the priesthood.”

4. Archbishop of Teresina (Brazil) Jacinto Furtado de Brito Sobrinho said in an interview in September 2012: “The fact that to be a priest one has to be celibate is a discipline of the Catholic Church that can change. . . The Pope is not infallible in everything that he says. The Church believes that he is infallible in faith and morals. . . Recently the Pope received married priests who left the Anglican Church to become Catholics with their families. There is room for this change to be acceptable. . . The Spirit will breathe upon the Church and the Pope will take an official stand that will give a double alternative to the Western Church (i. e., to be or not be celibate).”

This historical reflection was prepared by Anthony P. Kowalski.