

Married Priests : A Countercultural Witness

What is needed today is a constructive argument for a married priesthood in the Latin Church that is neither a pastoral/ecumenical accommodation nor a repudiation of priestly celibacy

By Richard R. Gaillardetz

It is very difficult to have a productive conversation about the possibility of a married priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. For some Catholics, any discussion of a change in the church's current discipline constitutes either an attack on the priesthood itself or a capitulation to a secular culture that cannot appreciate the spiritual gifts that a celibate priesthood offers the church. Some Catholics support a married priesthood as a way to argue against priestly celibacy, which they regard as an antiquated discipline that is antisex and at least indirectly responsible for the clerical sex-abuse crisis. Still others will argue for a married priesthood as a necessary pastoral response to the shortage of priests: the people of God, they say, have a right to the Eucharist, and that right trumps any spiritual or pastoral value in a celibate priesthood. Frequently, advocates of a married priesthood will point out that ecumenical accommodations have already been made for married Protestant ministers who convert to Catholicism, but those cases remain the exceptions to the rule. **What is needed today is a constructive argument for a married priesthood in the Latin Church that is neither a pastoral/ecumenical accommodation nor a repudiation of priestly celibacy.**

Any discussion of the relationship between celibacy and priesthood needs to distinguish between three different "logics" that have governed the practice of committed celibacy in the tradition. We find the first logic in the words of Jesus commanding those who freely become "eunuchs for the kingdom" (Matthew 19). We might speak of this as celibacy's prophetic witness to the values of the reign of God. According to this logic, one chooses a life of committed celibacy and renounces the sexual intimacy and companionship of marriage in order to enter into the paschal mystery in a distinctive way and give public witness to its transformative power.

This logic is not antisex: those who freely choose this way of life can also give witness to the liberating power of authentic sexuality, in part by resisting the contemporary tendency to reduce sexuality to sexual acts. This kind of prophetic witness invites all Christians to consider anew their own call to exercise the virtue of chastity, whatever the particular circumstances of their lives. A crucial characteristic of this logic is the presumption that the person considering a celibate way of life actually possesses a charism for celibacy. For those who recognize that charism in their lives, celibacy can be both demanding and fruitful. Without such a charism, however, celibacy can become a sterile burden. Prophetic celibacy first emerged in the witness of hermits and monks and continued to flourish in later forms of consecrated life. It has no intrinsic connection with the ministerial priesthood.

A second logic for celibacy, characterized by a concern for both moral and ritual purity, appears with particular force in the fourth and fifth centuries. Before examining this logic, we should recall a basic distinction: sexual continence refers to abstinence from sexual relations, whereas celibacy refers to forgoing marriage (and of course presumes sexual continence as well). The logic of purity sees the sexual continence of the clergy not as a freely embraced charism but as a canonical obligation intended to preserve the purity of the priest in view of his holy office. When it became difficult to ascertain whether married priests were observing sexual continence before celebrating the Eucharist, bishops and regional synods began calling not just for priestly continence but also for priestly celibacy.

The logic of purity is constructed around a selective appropriation of the norms governing the Levitical priesthood, as presented in the Old Testament. This logic treats sexual activity as a form of ritual defilement. It also draws on ancient Stoic suspicions of human sexuality. Sex, even in marriage, is viewed largely as a concession to natural appetites and to the necessity of procreation. Partly as a consequence of this second logic, sexual continence and eventually celibacy would become a canonical obligation for priests in the Latin Church.

Finally, there is a third logic for celibacy, what we might call the logic of ministerial freedom. This logic sees celibacy as providing a greater freedom for Gospel service because the minister is not preoccupied with familial obligations. (A fourth logic emerged in the early Middle Ages as a way of protecting church property from the inheritance claims of the clergy's offspring, but this logic lacks a properly theological foundation and so will not be considered here.) Note that the logic of ministerial freedom, like the logic of prophetic witness, assumes the presence of a charism, without which celibacy will be experienced only as a burden, not as a gift.

As long as celibacy was intended to preserve ritual purity, it made sense for it to be a canonical obligation for all priests. According to the logic of purity, the point of forbidding priests to marry was just to prevent them from engaging in sexual activity, which was judged to be incompatible with their cultic function. Since the Second Vatican Council, however, this logic has been largely abandoned (for good reasons). So we are left with the logics of prophetic witness and ministerial service. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church,

All the ordained ministers of the Latin Church, with the exception of permanent deacons, are normally chosen from among men of faith who live a celibate life and who intend to remain celibate "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to "the affairs of the Lord, they give themselves entirely to God and to men [and women]. Celibacy is a sign of this new life to the service of which the church's minister is consecrated; accepted with a joyous heart celibacy radiantly proclaims the Reign of God. (1579)

But this leaves us with a difficulty. As Heinz Vogels argues in *Celibacy: Gift or Law* [2] (1993), a celibate life lived as prophetic witness and in genuine freedom for gospel service cannot be mandated by canonical obligation; it can emerge only as the free recognition and embrace of a particular charism.

A better understanding of celibacy's proper role in the church would require a better theology of vocation—one that properly distinguished between various ministries on the one hand and various forms of holiness on the other. Despite some helpful developments in its theology of vocation, the Second Vatican Council continued to draw on the traditional view of Christian vocation, configured around three alternative "states of life": marriage, priesthood, and religious life. However, an alternative framework presents itself in the middle four chapters of *Lumen Gentium* [3]. Chapters 3 (on the hierarchy) and 4 (on the laity) explore how the church is constituted by its different charisms and ministries. Chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with the call to holiness—the former with the perfection of charity to which all Christians are called, and the latter with the public witness to holiness offered by consecrated religious. What we see embedded in the order of these four chapters is not the traditional "three states" schema, but the outlines of a new schema constructed along two axes.

The first is ministerial: Am I called to serve the church through the charisms I have received from baptism or through ordination? The second axis has to do with holiness and forms of Christian discipleship: Am I called to pursue that Christian holiness proper to all disciples of Jesus, or am I called to give a public witness to the demands of discipleship and the values of the reign of God through a form of public vowed life? This framework has the merit of unhinging the ministerial priesthood from any necessary relationship with either celibacy or marriage, since the call to priestly ministry would be realized along one axis, and the call to the single life, marriage, or committed celibacy along the second axis.

Some male religious communities have preserved this distinction by insisting that those seeking entrance into their community focus on their embrace of its charism and apostolate before they explore the quite separate question of whether they are called to priestly ministry. The process for those entering the diocesan priesthood should be adapted along the same lines, so as to leave room for the possibility that a candidate for priestly ministry may not have a charism for celibacy [4]. The lack of that charism should not be thought to invalidate a vocation to the priesthood.

For much of the history of the Latin Church, priestly celibacy was defended according to the logic of purity: the priesthood was seen as essentially incompatible with the sexual intimacy of marriage. This logic depended on a rather harsh appraisal of the character of human sexuality. A much more positive

theology of sexuality emerged in the twentieth century, offering the possibility of a new assessment of a married priesthood—one based on the recognition that Christian marriage is not an alternative to an ascetical life, but a form of it.

I have no wish to demonize secular culture; grace is at work there too. Yet we cannot ignore the force of consumerism, which turns goods into commodities and encourages an “upgrade mentality,” even with respect to human beings. This mentality can make lifelong commitment appear almost nonsensical. At the same time, our culture’s preoccupation with romance and passion can make the mundane marital practice of companionship appear boring, laborious, and ultimately unnecessary. Consider the myth of Mr. or Ms. Right—the naïve conviction that there is one “right person” out there for each of us. This is a myth often underwritten by an inadequate understanding of divine providence and the misguided Christian conviction that God has intended “one person and only one person” for each of us who feel called to marriage. This myth can make the inevitable pains and disappointments within a marriage appear as indications that one has chosen the wrong person (“I see now that my spouse was not the right one”).

Against this cultural backdrop, authentic Christian married life will inevitably be countercultural and prophetic. The public profession of marriage vows engages Christian spouses in a prophetic form of renunciation, a free embrace of limits for the sake of Christian witness and mission. The vows of marriage bind a couple together “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.” The faithful companionship to which Christian marriage calls us retains a vital and necessary ascetical character. Moreover, we must resist reducing marital lovemaking to “the thing celibates don’t get to do”; it, too, participates in the prophetic witness of marriage. Conjugal love is not constituted by a mere “right to the body of one’s spouse” (*ius in corpus*). In its potential for intimacy and vulnerability, as well as delight, and in its humble openness to new life, it is a sign of contradiction in a culture that commodifies sex and deprecates fidelity.

Christian married couples, like faithful celibate priests and consecrated religious, give prophetic witness to eschatological values associated with the coming of God’s reign: chastity, radical forgiveness, vulnerability, fidelity, hospitality, generosity, and gratitude.

Were leaders in the Latin Church to recognize the prophetic witness of Christian married life, they might look at the possibility of a married priesthood with new eyes. They might see that marriage, like committed celibacy, is a concrete form of the universal call to holiness that can fruitfully support priestly ministry. They might come to see a married priesthood not as a reluctant pastoral or ecumenical accommodation but as a genuine gift to the entire church. They might recognize in a married priesthood a valuable complement to a celibate priesthood, a form of life well suited for both ministry and prophetic witness. And if a married priesthood helped challenge the misuse of priestly celibacy as a support for clerical elitism, well, that wouldn’t be so bad either.

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