

Clerical Obligations of Celibacy, Obedience, Prayer, and Simplicity of Life

SL 506 – The Theology of the Priesthood and Holy Orders

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## Chastity

One of the most misunderstood promises made by a man receiving Holy Orders is his commitment to celibacy. The Code of Canon Law succinctly provides the legislation and the theological and practical reasons for the practice of priestly celibacy:

Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence<sup>1</sup> for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are bound to celibacy which is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and are able to dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and humanity. (CIC 277§1)

The secular world sees such a commitment as a repression of the human sexual drive that can only lead to disaster; indeed, it is blamed by some for the atrocious actions of some priests in recent decades. The Protestant world sees the commitment as an unbiblical accretion to the faith imposed by the Roman Church. In truth, neither of these are the case. Rather, clerical celibacy is a promise of an ordained man with biblical, theological, and practical roots that is ordered to the full flowering and expression of his spiritual fatherhood.

The biblical foundations for priestly celibacy are mentioned in the footnote to the “eminent position” given the promise of celibacy in *Lumen Gentium* (LG 42) which is quoted in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. That document cites Matthew 19:11 and 1 Cor 7:7. In Matthew, Jesus responds to the disciples concern that, if divorce is no longer to be allowed, as it was not intended in creation prior to man’s hardness of heart, then “it is better not to marry” (Mt 19:10)<sup>2</sup> To this observation, Jesus expounds the value of celibacy:

Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made

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<sup>1</sup> The promise of “perfect and perpetual continence,” which, strictly speaking, means abstaining from all sexual activity necessarily includes refraining from marriage for those who are not already married since consummating a marriage is necessary for a completed marriage, *ratum et consummatum*. This also explains the rule by which permanent deacons may not remarry if their spouse dies.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (Washington, D.C: National Council of Churches of Christ, 1993). Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural quotations and references will come from this translation.

eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can. (Mt 19:11-12)

In this section, the disciples have observed that it is, perhaps, “better not to marry” (Mt 19:10).

Jesus’ response is foundational to the scriptural understanding of clerical celibacy. In ordination for the Latin Church, men declare themselves able to accept such a commitment and “make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:12).

Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians is also cited by the Council to provide a scriptural basis for this priestly discipline. In that letter, Paul observes the differences in focus of the married and unmarried man:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. (1 Cor 7:32-34)

In this passage, Paul is merely reflecting on human nature. A man simply cannot be, at the same time, both a good husband and a good priest in service of the Church and the People of God. The limitations of man will cause one or the other to be left insufficiently served.

In that same letter, Paul expresses his desire “that all were as I myself am” (1 Cor 7:7). Paul is referring to his own unmarried state that allows him to devote himself entirely to the service of the Gospel. Some might point out that it is clear that Peter was married by virtue of the fact that he has a mother-in-law, and assert that refutes Paul’s exhortation. However, it must be noted that Peter never proposed any teachings around this example of his, and he did not refute Paul’s stated desire for the Church in Corinth. Just as in Jesus’ exhortation that this teaching should be accepted by those able to do so, Paul recognizes that priestly celibacy is a gift from God, not an imposition from the Church; a genuine call to priestly life includes the charism, the gift, of priestly celibacy (cf. PO 16).

The Second Vatican Council took up a theological reflection on the gift of priestly celibacy in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. Here, the gift of celibacy for the Kingdom is, first and foremost, “a sign and a stimulus for pastoral charity and a special source of spiritual fecundity in the world” (PO 16). It should be noted that, in this same section, the Council acknowledged that celibacy “is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood” (PO 16) and looks to the example of the early Church, likely, among others, Peter’s own married state, and that of the Eastern Churches to evidence this.

According to *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, “the whole priestly mission is dedicated to the service of a new humanity which Christ, the victor over death, has aroused through his Spirit in the world and which has its origin “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man but of God” (PO 16). In this eschatological view, men “neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mt 22:30). With that in mind, it makes sense that a priest, who is to be so dedicated to Christ, forgoes marriage in favor of this sign of the eschaton.

Furthermore, the life of priestly celibacy in which the priest is entirely and undividedly devoted to the Church is a sign of the mystical marriage of Christ, for whom the priest functions *in persona Christi capitis*, and the Church, the bride of Christ:

In this way they profess themselves before men as willing to be...a chaste virgin for Christ and thus to evoke the mysterious marriage established by Christ, and fully to be manifested in the future, in which the Church has Christ as her only Spouse. They give, moreover, a living sign of the world to come, by a faith and charity already made present, in which the children of the resurrection neither marry nor take wives. (PO 16)

This reflects, as does all Catholic liturgy and the underpinnings of Christian theology, the eschatological orientation of Christ’s Church on earth. Far from shunning marriage and sexuality as it was created in man, the priest channels all of these drives to the sign of the Church’s one spouse and the world to come.

It must not be ignored that there is also a practical aspect of priestly celibacy; even in the apostolic age, Paul alluded to this in the same passage discussed above from his First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul distinguished between a man who is anxious of the things of God with him who is anxious of the things of his wife and the world (see 1 Cor 7:32-34). The Council Fathers observed the same when they said of celibate clergy: “they dedicate themselves more freely in him and through him to the service of God and men, and they more expeditiously minister to his Kingdom and the work of heavenly regeneration, and thus they are apt to accept, in a broad sense, paternity in Christ” (PO 16).

With all this in mind, it is necessary to understand that priestly celibacy is a discipline of the Church to which the Church has the authority to make exceptions. As the Second Vatican Council noted, even while supporting the tradition of priestly celibacy, priestly celibacy is “not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood” (PO 16). It is this fact that allows the Church to maintain this practice while allowing exceptions for priests in the Eastern Rites or those entering full communion from some Protestant communities.

As it has been shown here, contrary to the assertions of the secular world and of various Protestant communities, priestly celibacy is not merely a remnant of medieval property protections or an unhealthy repression of natural human desire. Rather, it is a practice that finds its origin in Sacred Scripture and the Apostolic teachings of the Church. The Church has continued to reflect on this promise and tradition to continually develop an ever deeper theological understanding. These, combined with the practical considerations have given the Church reasons to maintain the call for men receiving Holy Orders to voluntarily assume the promise of priestly celibacy.

## Obedience

Priestly obedience is borne of the hierarchical nature of the Church, but it is not expected of priests solely to maintain good order. Rather, the obedience is to be a result of the priest as collaborator and co-worker. The chief pastor of any diocese is the bishop; in the early Church, the governance of the bishop was sufficient. However, as time progressed and converts and other Christians multiplied, it became apparent that the bishop could not govern and teach the entire Christian people of a region without assistance. When this happened, priests began to undertake some of the roles of governance and spiritual paternity of the Bishop who, himself, serves in the place of the supreme shepherd, Christ. This relationship between the priest, his bishop, and Christ is outlined in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*.

The supreme shepherd of the Church is Christ himself. As the Church sojourns on earth, she is entrusted to the Bishop of Rome and the successors of the Apostles, the bishops. In them, the authority of Christ is exercised on earth. Therefore, in light of his office and his ordination to the fullness of Holy Orders, the bishop receives a promise of respect and obedience from the men he ordains to priestly ministry. This twofold promise is not primarily for the good and efficient governance of the Church; rather, it is ordered to the mission of the Church in the world: the salvation of souls in preparation for the return of our savior. Furthermore, in the present day, advances in communication and transportation combined with an increasingly secular dominant worldview have made the Church's mission ever more difficult. To that end, priests "stand by their bishops in sincere charity and obedience" because "only by joining forces with other priests under the direction of the Church authorities" can the Church achieve her temporal end (PO 7).

### Praying the Liturgy of the Hours

In a practical response to the exhortation of our Lord to “pray always” (Lk 18:1; MD 139) and that of Saint Paul to “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17) and that of the Sacred Author of the Letter to the Hebrews that we should, “Through [Jesus],...continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God” (Heb 13:15, MD 139), priests and transitional deacons are expected to pray the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours.<sup>3</sup> In, *Mediator Dei*, Pope Pius XII outlines some of the Scriptural antecedents to this practice:

According to the acts of the Apostles, the disciples of Jesus Christ all came together to pray at the third hour, when they were all filled with the Holy Ghost (Cf. Acts, 2:1–15); and before eating, the Prince of the Apostles went up to the higher parts of the house to pray, about the sixth hour (*Ibid.*, 10:9); Peter and John “went up into the Temple at the ninth hour of prayer” (*Ibid.*, 3:1) and at “midnight Paul and Silas praying ... praised God.” (*Ibid.*, 16:25) (MD 140)

Hence, from apostolic times, and taking from our Jewish forebears, Christians have sanctified the day by praying at specific times through the course of the day.

The Divine Office is the prayer of the entire Mystical Body of Jesus Christ. In this, priest, deacons, monastics, and others who have been deputed by the Church to these prayers offer prayer in the name of and on behalf of both the Body of Christ corporately and each member of that body (MD 142). When the Divine Office is prayed, the Church prays with the very words of Sacred Scripture since “we know not what we should pray for” (Rom 8:26, MD 144).

In the divine office, those who cannot pray, do not know how to pray, or cannot find the words have their prayers heard on the lips of the clergy and ministers of the Church who are deputed by the Church to pray always for all the people of God.

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<sup>3</sup> While the terms “Divine Office” and “Liturgy of the Hours” can be used to indicate the preconciliar and postconciliar versions of these prayers, respectively, the terms will here be used interchangeably since latter is the organic development approved under the authority of the Church of the former. Hence, either text is justified and allowable as a “proper and approved liturgical book” per CIC 276 §2 3°.

### **Simplicity of Life**

The Code of Canon Law obliges all “Clerics...to foster simplicity of life and are to refrain from all things that have a semblance of vanity” (CIC 282). Perhaps the most important reason for this counsel is that the clergy is called to be an example to all Christians as they are called to “esteem created goods as gifts of God” (PO 17). As was discussed above in the discussion of priestly celibacy, priests are meant to be eschatological signs. If a priest elevates some created good to the place that should be held only by God, then he not only risks misleading but also scandalizing the faithful. Hence, priests are to “By using the world as those who do not use it (Cf. 1 Cor 7:31), let them achieve that freedom whereby they are free from every inordinate concern and become docile to the voice of God in their daily life” (PO 17).

As with chastity, the priestly simplicity of life serves a purpose in the priest’s own spiritual growth, as well.

From this freedom and docility grows spiritual discretion in which is found the right relationship to the world and earthly goods. Such a right relationship is of great importance to priests, because the mission of the Church is fulfilled in the midst of the world and because created goods are altogether necessary for the personal development of man. (PO 17)

Created goods are, as the term implies, good, but it is easy for man to become so enamored with the created world and, especially in the modern age, with the acquisition of wealth and property, that he can no longer discern the movements of the Lord in his own life. Therefore, the simplicity of life to which a priest is called serves to teach him to properly use the created goods of the world while ordering their use to the good of the People of God.

In short, there are three theological bases for priestly simplicity of life. First, in living such a life, the priest sets an example and avoids scandal to the faithful. Second, he quiets the cacophony of the world so he is able to hear and respond to the gentle movement of the Spirit in his own life. Finally, he is able to properly order created goods to the good of the people of God.

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Celibacy and consecrated virginity stretch across the whole trajectory of Christian history. The more specific history of celibacy attached to holy orders has had many complex turns for both the Eastern and Western churches. For our purposes, I will limit myself to the Western church and the last 500 years, from the time of the Council of Trent (1565) to our moment today. One of the great reforms that followed the Council of Trent was the establishment of seminaries and, with that, the possibility of consistent training and preparation for priesthood, including training or formation for celiba...