

Married to the Church

PRIESTS ARE MARRIED TO THE CHURCH.

What does that mean? How could that be?

Ah! theirs is a spiritual marriage, like Christ's, who described Himself as a bridegroom (Matthew 9:15).

Thus priests are not allowed to marry a woman because it would be a sort of spiritual bigamy.

THE BRIDEGROOM AND THE BRIDE

Holy Orders and Matrimony -- The Sacraments at the Service of Communion [as in 'the communion of saints'] — are **directed towards the salvation of others**; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so.

Catechism of the Catholic Church §1534

These social sacraments keep the Church going as a people, a family. A family is founded on a marriage. And Holy Orders and Matrimony are founded on the Mystical Marriage between Christ and His Church:

Students [for the priesthood] should have a proper knowledge of the duties and dignity of Christian marriage, which represents the love which exists between Christ and the Church (cf. Ephesians 5:32).

They should recognize, however, the greater excellency of virginity consecrated to Christ so that they may offer themselves to the Lord with fully deliberate and generous choice, and a complete surrender of body and soul,"

Vatican II, On the Training of Priests (Optatam totius) §10.

This is expressed in a nutshell, thus:

Consecrated virginity

is even more noble than marriage

because it is a spiritual marriage with God.

Catholic Family Catechism Apostles' Edition 435

EPIPHANY: THE MYSTICAL MARRIAGE

The Epiphany on 6th January (in Australia, Sunday after New Year's Day) embraces three events, though separated in time: **the visit of the Magi, the Baptism of Christ and the Wedding Feast at Cana:**

Today the Church

has been joined to her heavenly bridegroom,

since Christ has purified her of her sins

in the river Jordan:

the Magi hasten to the royal wedding

and offer gifts;

the wedding guests rejoice

since Christ has changed water into wine, alleluia.

Benedictus antiphon for the Epiphany
in both the Old and New Breviaries

PRIEST'S FIRST SACRIFICE: HIMSELF

Priestly celibacy can assuage self-doubts:

I will not offer..., a sacrifice which cost me nothing.

2 Samuel 24:24

Thou must not appear empty before the Lord thy God.

Deuteronomy 16:16

A fictional bishop said to a prospective subdeacon:

...no other human sacrifice can compare with celibacy and virginity. Its primary purpose is to honour God, so that we who stand at the altar of His Sacrifice shall have made the most fundamental sacrifice we can. But its secondary use is to prove our good faith, not to others, but to ourselves... inevitably you will doubt yourself.

Mitre and Crook (1979) Fr Bryan Houghton, p. 146

PRACTICAL MATTERS

THERE ARE practical reasons of a more **worldly** sort in favour of priestly celibacy.

If a priest were allowed to receive Matrimony:

- he would find it hard to do justice to a wife and family;
- their needs would reduce his priestly availability;
- their support would overburden the collections;
- extra stress might lead to divorce (cf. Protestant clergy) since today the Devil is managing to break up even long-standing marriages with big families.

We are living in a terrible age in which there are some secular humanists working towards a fully fornicating society — exactly as foretold in 1932 by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (which included the abolition of the word 'mother').

Our 'Catholic' dissenters, too, rail against the Churches teaching on sexual morality from natural moral law, and they also rail against the law of celibacy for the priests of the Roman Rite. Indeed, their priest-complainants do give the impression that they find celibacy a personal burden, a pastoral mistake, and inhibiting for vocations. But have they persevered in living the supernatural life? In this matter, in our own time, false prophets abound;

I have put a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.

1 Kings 22:22

There are also practical reasons of a more **spiritual** sort in favour of priestly celibacy:

- avoiding the divided heart of serving two masters or, to put it another way, of having two wives;
- the laity grieve at any alienation of a priest's spiritual affections for God or their 'ownership' of him;
- marriage is not a panacea for misfits and would not fix priests who have psycho-sexual vices; and what is more, married men also find bodily temptations hard,

CELIBACY IS THE SOLUTION

Consecrated celibacy has proven practical and realistic for those living the supernatural life of grace, i.e. by faith, by grace, by set Church prayers, and by devout use of Confession and Holy Communion, it does not work for those not living supernaturally.

Marital purity, too, is proven practical and realistic for the lay apostolate. Both it and consecrated celibacy suffer from Satan's attacks and original sin.

Consecrated celibacy has served priests well:

- a closer following of Christ (cf. Mat 19:12);
- more suited to prayer (cf. Acts 6:4);
- a living image of the world to come (cf. Mat 22:30);
- more suitable for Confessional confidences;
- an example to married men of persevering in the vows of one's state of life when it involves both "for better, or for worse",
- a dramatic 'demo' against the sins of an adulterous generation in favour of fidelity to God:

When things are in danger, some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.

Frodo to Sam, J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Lord of the Rings*; last chapter

CONFUSIONS IN WORDS

God requires **chastity** (i.e. **purity**) from everyone, so it is misleading to speak of priestly "vows of perpetual chastity", since marriage vows promise perpetual chastity, too: it's the details that are different.

Celibate means not married and VIRGIN means not sexually experienced. Celibacy and virginity as such are inferior to the married state. It is celibacy and virginity **consecrated to God** that are a spiritual marriage and thereby a higher calling (cf. Mat 19:12).

Just as a priest is spiritually married to the Church, so **every Christian soul is to be spiritually married to Christ** (cf. Religious life of nuns and brothers).

Spiritual fatherhood and motherhood are a legitimate and healthy sublimation of 'the sex drive'. Civilization depends on some sublimation of personal 'drives', e.g. it depends on monogamous marriages, and historically, has always collapsed without them.

Thus spiritual motherhood, for instance, has been practised historically not only by consecrated Religious, but by those former 'formidable females', such as hospital matrons, and vocational school teachers.

PRACTICAL SPIRITUAL CHALLENGES

(1) A practical motive for consecrated celibacy, which merges into the higher spiritual motives* is that it can bring out the best in a man to **require of him something especially difficult**;

Tom had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it, namely, that, in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make it difficult.

Mark Twain: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, on whitewashing the fence,

Significantly, this is quoted in *The Book of Virtues*, as also is Sir Ernest Shackleton (1874-1922). Shackleton's advertisement for one of his antarctic expeditions lacked any soft soap for namby-pambies — and he was flooded with applicants:

MEN WANTED FOR HAZARDOUS JOURNEY.

Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful.

Honour and recognition in case of success.

Ernest Shackleton.

Men and boys need something to strive for, like self-forgetfulness. Think of the anger of the Syrian leper, Namaan, at the studied casualness of Elisha the Prophet, who wouldn't even come to the door, but sent a servant to tell him to wash seven times in the Jordan, Namaan was insulted and turned away in a towering rage. He repented after his own servants chided him:

If the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?

2 Kings 5:8-14

(2) The other side of the coin to making-it-difficult is **making-it-more-noble**. There is something dashing, demanding and even dangerous in the celibacy of priests — just as there is in marriage, when Christ raised its natural status to the dignity of a seventh sacrament,

(3) The consecrated celibacy of a priest or bishop is a **sacramental**, a lesser sign than a sacrament, of acting in the Person of the Bridegroom of the Church.

KEEPING PROMISES and Commandments

J.R.R. Tolkien, in *Tree and Leaf* (1939), justified fantasy tales (like *The Lord of the Rings*), for their practical benefits of inspiring noble action in daily life:

- Keeping promises, even with intolerable consequences (application: marriage vows and vows of celibacy);
- Observing prohibitions (application: "Thou shalt not commit adultery").

APPARENT EXCEPTIONS to celibacy

In the Eastern Rites of our wonderful Christian multiculturalism, whether they are in union with the Pope or not, a married man *may* be ordained, but **once ordained a man may not marry**, nor may married priests whose wives die remarry, and only celibate priests can be bishops. So there is nowhere in Christendom that allows priests to marry.

Another apparent exception were the dispensations begun by Pope Pius XII for convert clergy, such as Lutherans and Anglicans, to allow their Catholic ordination. There are some in Australia.

Interestingly, there is now a resurgence of research into the history of clerical celibacy which claims it was the practice and the rule from the beginning, i.e. in the apostolic age. Far from the Roman Rite of Western Christendom having become gradually stricter, it is the practices of Eastern Christianity which have been relaxed. See *Book News* of the Cardinal Newman Faith Resources Inc, <www.cardinalnewman.com.au>.

APOLOGETICS

Both Church and Bible mix their metaphors of brides, bridegrooms, and spiritual espousals to God, for such non-material realities require poetic descriptions.

Seminarians need to be helped spiritually, and in other appropriate ways, to nourish a conviction of the relationship of celibacy to their priestly vocation, and its fruitfulness in the priestly ministry, and to commit themselves to its observance.

Celibacy does not despise marriage, but forgoes it, precisely *because* it is so good. Consecrated virginity is not a negation of marriage, rather it is a spiritual marriage. Note the self-surrender idea in VII on p. 1.

The obstacle to earthly marriage is not the experience of sexual union, but the continuing covenant of mutual dependence of husband and wife. Edward Henry Manning, 1808-1892, a former married Anglican priest, became a Catholic and was ordained in 1851. Later, he became Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. (And rather unkindly, his ecclesiastical enemies said: "The greatest tragedy for the Church in 19th century England was the death of Cardinal Manning's wife"!)

A celibate priest has & greater likeness to Christ than a married priest of the Eastern Rites for he is more obviously 'married to the Church', Christ's mystic bride. Married priests have a less spiritual discipline and a lesser witness. And the faithful perceive this.

Finally, priests who encourage people to address them as 'Father' and who dress distinctively so as to be known as priests, are more likely to esteem their own consecrated celibacy, and to have the laity esteem it, too.