

Summary Document No 6

Priesthood, Celibacy and Marriage

Since the 12th century, Catholic Church law has forbidden [Latin Rite](#)ⁱ priests to marry. It is not a doctrinal matter, but a pastoral discipline. It does not apply to the [Eastern Churches](#)ⁱⁱ.

The theological arguments supporting celibacy uphold the *sacerdotal* model of priesthood found in the Old Testament, and invoked in the *Letter to the Hebrews*: the priest is “chosen from among men [and] appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God” (5:1). Like the Old Testament priests, he belongs to a particular caste, one of whose principal functions is to offer sacrifice to God on the people’s behalf. Since Christ is the Eternal and only High priest, the priest by ordination involves himself in the “specific ontological bond which unites the priesthood to Christ the High Priest and Good Shepherd” [*Pastores dabo vobis* n. 11].

Celibacy, according to this theology, befits this exalted status because it is a ‘perfect’ sign of ‘the kingdom of God’ inasmuch as it is “a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can more easily remain close to Christ with an undivided heart, and can dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and their neighbour” (Canon 277). By contrast, “marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an *imperfect* sign of the love between Christ and the Church” (*Amoris Laetitia* n.72, emphasis added). Though not essential to it, “celibacy is seen as a positive enrichment of the priesthood” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 29).

Challengers of the law see this theology as dubious and argue that retention of the law excludes from ministry many whose qualifications may signify their calling to it. For them, priesthood should be conceived rather on the *presbyteral* model - as a ministry to uphold “the presence of the word of the gospel within the community and to see to its progress from one arena of time and place to another”, above all by “proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26) (Collins 2016, 138-9).

A calling to ministry is not a calling to a caste – far less to a celibate caste – but to a ministry of the word: “Any man or woman who can be recognised by the Christian community – through its leaders or in the very body of its membership – as being faithful to the word and as having the potential to deliver it to others ... is a candidate for ministry”. The *presbyteral* model does not renounce the Eucharistic role of the priest, but rather places it within its proper context within the ministry of the word: “The minister may not thereby be constituted on the model of the ancient ‘priest’/*sacerdos*. But in ‘proclaiming the death of the Lord until he comes’ (1 Cor. 11:26), he or she will be making the statement that underpins all other activities of believing Christians” (Collins 2016, 139).

Priesthood is thus a distinct vocation from celibacy.

Catholics have long valued celibacy as a vocation in its own right - a gift from God - to renounce marriage 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'. Why then has the Latin Rite bound it to priesthood? According to Canon 277 (§1), sacred ministers, by marriage, divide their hearts and limit their freedom for ministry. But sacred ministers' hearts are only divided if ministry is conceived as a quasi-marriage to Christ. Why shouldn't the minister's experience of conjugal love *enhance* his/her love for Christ? Marriage surely makes most people more capable of following their vocations.

Are married priests inferior to celibate priests because marriage makes them somehow unfaithful to their priestly vocation? This theology contradicts John Pauls II's own teaching that marriage and celibacy are 'two ways of expressing and living the one mystery of the Covenant of God with [us].

Today, the law's defenders argue that the church cannot afford to separate the office of priesthood from the vocation to celibacy. Another view is that, pastorally, the church cannot afford to maintain the bond between the two. Pastoral need now demands the amendment of Canon 277 to liberate celibacy from the shadow of priesthood, and to enable those called to priesthood *and marriage* to attest the value conferred on human sexuality by the creator.

This paper has assumed the present situation of all priests being male; see also our separate *Summary Document No.5, [Women and Ministry](#)*ⁱⁱⁱ.

References

Collins, JN 2016, *Gateway to Renewal: reclaiming ministries for women and men*, Morning Star Publishing, Melbourne, Vic.

McBrien, RP 1994, 1st edn. 1980, *Catholicism*, Collins-Dove, North Blackburn,, Vic.

Bongiflio, Ryan, Priests and Priesthood in the Hebrew Bible,
<http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/priests.xhtml>

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin_Church

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Catholic_Churches

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/documents.htm> (Document No. 93/5)