

REFLECTIONS ON THE ISSUE OF MANDATORY CELIBACY FOR ORDINATION IN THE LATIN RITE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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The issue of mandatory celibacy for ordination to priesthood in the Latin Rite has become a significant topic for the process of church renewal. During the listening phase of the Plenary Council in Australia, the current Synod of Germany, the Amazon Synod and the public church media in many countries have highlighted the growing movement to seriously address this issue in church life. The global exposition of sexual abuse by clergy, such as the finding of the Royal Commission in Australia (December 2016) sharpened the debate about mandatory celibacy for priesthood. Clericalism with its association to mandatory celibacy has been identified by many church leaders, including Pope Francis, as a major impediment to church renewal.

It is important to begin this reflection by emphasising that the issue briefly addressed here is not about the charism of celibacy which has been and continues to be a sacred gift of the Spirit that has been lived and is now lived by billions of Christians including monks, Religious and dedicated lay groups throughout the ages.

The issue considered here is whether mandatory celibacy should continue as a dictum for future ordinations in the Latin Rite church.

Given the growing shortfall of priests in many countries with an estimated 10 – 15% of 1.3 billion Catholics who no longer have regular access to celebrations of the Eucharist and sacraments, why should the 12th century laws specifying mandatory celibacy for priests in the Latin Rite continue to be upheld? Does the enforcement of this legal condition for ordination take precedence over a more universal priority of regular access to Eucharist and sacraments for the People of God?

Mandatory celibacy for ordination was legislated by the First Lateran Council 1123 (canon 3) and Second Lateran Council 1139 (canon 6, 7).

Influences on the movement towards the Lateran Council legislation

1. From the very beginning of the church life, faith communities have struggled with upholding a holistic appreciation of sexuality in its teachings, spirituality and church governance. Early Christianity had to combat both negative views about the body as evil and the superiority of the soul over material things. This toxic dualism emanated from heresies such as Gnosticism and Montanism. Neo-Platonic thought in the fourth century emphasised a dualism between spirit and matter, things of the world and spiritual realms. A celibate state was judged to be on a higher spiritual plane than a married state of life. Sex in marriage was tolerated as necessary for the propagation of

the human race but a degradation of the spiritual essence of being human. Augustine held that sex between husband and wife was at least a venial sin.

2. The emergence of monasteries after the fourth century reinforced the pre-eminence of 'flight from world' spirituality. Salvation was more assured in monastic rather than worldly living.
3. The patriarchal culture and legislation of the Roman Empire were reinforced by the patriarchy of the Judeo-Christian traditions, especially in the marginalism of women in leadership of Christian communities after the second century. Women by their very nature were designated as ontologically subordinate to men (eg. Aristotle, Gratian's *Decretum* 1140).
4. The gradual transformation of clergy after the fourth century from a style of living in a ministry of service to a cultic state of priesthood began to posit the view of a priest as 'another Christ' (*alter Christus*). Since Christ was not married, it was held that it was more edifying for a priest as *persona Christi* to remain celibate.
5. The notion of 'white martyrdom' (different from 'red martyrdom') affirmed a celibate state of living where a person renounced things of the world, including sex, to devote oneself completely to Christ without the distractions of worldly affairs.
6. Apart from monks with the vow of chastity, until the early Middle Ages most clergy were married. In spite of 600 years of decrees, canons and harsh penalties (eg an ecclesial decree in 1096 directed that wives and children of priests were to be sold in slavery) Latin Rite clergy continued to be married and have children.
7. By the early Middle Ages the papacy became much more powerful and the church much more bureaucratic thus enabling a monarchical papacy to enforce its prohibition of married clergy. Medieval popes tended to have monastic backgrounds and thus favoured a vow of chastity (mandatory celibacy) for all priesthood, not just for monks.
8. During the early Middle Ages the church began to acquire major land holdings. Increasingly there were land inheritance disputes between the families of the priest and wives and children of priests. A celibate clergy would remove this problem and church land would remain as church land after the non-married priest died.
9. With the rise of monastic power in the higher realms of the church and hierarchy, including the papacy, there was an increasing momentum to legislate for mandatory celibacy.
10. The First and Second Lateran Councils (1123 and 1139) decreed mandatory celibacy as an absolute condition for ordination.

11. This legislation did not impact on Eastern Churches with married priests permitted under certain conditions. In 2009 Pope Benedict allowed those married Anglican priests who converted to Catholicism to continue their priestly ministry in the married state.
12. Pope Paul VI (*Sacerdotalis Coelibatus* 1967) and Pope St John Paul II (*Pastores dabo Vobis* 1992) reiterated the traditional rationale for mandatory celibacy viz. A priest is a ‘*persona Christi*’; a celibate priest offers freedom for pastoral service; a celibate priest is able to give his whole commitment to the mission of the church.
13. There is a growing demand by faith communities to plead for integrity by the official church with its law of mandatory celibacy in the face of the reality of what research shows that a number of clergy in the Latin Rite are living with partners.
14. The conservative elements in the Catholic Church firmly resist any lessening of the mandatory celibacy in priesthood as a marker of fidelity to a purported venerable tradition of the church. Mandatory celibacy is A tradition for priestly ministry. It is not THE tradition for priestly ministry. The recent book *Depths of Our Hearts* (2019) by Cardinal Robert Sarah with co-author (sic) Benedict as Pope Emeritus has stimulated discussion again on the issue of mandatory celibacy by the book’s strong defence of its retention in Latin Rite Catholic priests.
15. A relaxation of laws relating to mandatory celibacy will be highly contested by influential elements in the church. A recent example of this dilemma was how Pope Francis avoided this issue in his apostolic exhortation (*Querida Amazonia* January 2020). In spite of strong recommendations by two-thirds of the bishops in the Pan-Amazon Synod to authorise the ordination of married men (*viri probati*), Pope Francis deferred to take this step at this time so as to concentrate on the urgency of massive threats to the ecology of the mighty Amazon region.

Why is there a growing movement in the Catholic Church to review the legislation of mandatory celibacy for priesthood?

The following themes are relevant in this movement:

- A much more healthy holistic appreciation of sexuality and marriage has developed during the last fifty years of Catholic life.

- A greater awareness of the historical elements involved in the 12th century legislation and the psychological/social/spiritual forces influencing the contemporary position of the official church towards mandatory celibacy.
- The global sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic church raised serious questions in the public domain and faith communities about the problem of clericalism especially the role of priestly celibacy in this abuse. However it should be emphasised that there is no direct link between priestly celibacy and paedophilia. The incidence of sexual abuse of minors in families is well verified.
- A growing shortage of priests in many countries (eg. Amazon region, even Ireland!) has prompted questions about the pastoral effectiveness of priests outsourced from other countries especially with associated diverse social and theological concerns. The current 'solution' (sic) of collapsing parishes into large pastoral centres and bringing clergy from other countries offers no enduring solution at all but simply prop up a basic question which will not go away.
- A basic question to ask those who oppose any change in upholding mandatory celibacy is whether they are placing a medieval church law and discarded clergy/laity theology above the prospect of all Catholics having regular access to Eucharist and sacraments. The proposed response of praying harder for priestly vocations is no solution at all.
- The living example of married clergy in Eastern Rites and other mainline Christian churches such as the Anglican and Uniting church offers practical ways forward for the new pastoral structures and governance for optional celibacy in Latin Rite priesthood.
- A growing demand for a full inclusion of women into ordained ministry also adds urgency to raising the whole question of what is the nature of ordination in contemporary theologies of ministry and how might the regular celebration of the Eucharist and sacraments – so central to Christian faith, be enhanced.

May the Spirit of discernment lead the People of God to expressions of priestly ministry which reflect the Jesus spirit of service for energising faith communities.

Caution: In a process of discernment for decisions about a continuation of mandatory celibacy, there needs to be a pastoral sensitivity to affirm the commitment and pastoral care of priests who have been ordained in the Latin Rite.

The sacred charism of celibacy is to be celebrated and supported through caring faith communities, personal friendships and spiritual direction.

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