

exception of the lower clergy of the Eastern rite Churches united with Rome, and of the former Protestant pastors with families who have been ordained priests, most of them from the Anglican Communion.

From the perception that Catholic priests are all celibate, the idea has spread that clerical celibacy consists in the prohibition of marriage. And therefore that "moving past" celibacy consists both in ordaining married men as priests and allowing them to continue living conjugal life, and in permitting celibate priests to marry.

After Vatican Council II, both of these requests have been advanced repeatedly in the Catholic Church, even by bishops and cardinals.

But both of them are in clear contrast with the entire tradition of this Church itself, beginning from the apostolic era, and in the case of the second request with the tradition of the Eastern Churches as well, and therefore with the journey of ecumenism.

Also, the idea that "moving past" celibacy is the most appropriate choice for the Catholic Church of today is by no means shared by the reigning pope.

Going by what Benedict XVI says and does, his intention is the opposite: not to move past, but to confirm priestly celibacy, as a radical following of Jesus in service of all, all the more so at a crucial crossroads of civilization like the present.

This is precisely the aim of the Year for Priests that he proclaimed, with the holy Curé of Ars as model: a poor country priest who lived celibacy as total dedication for the salvation of souls, a life completely consumed at the altar and in the

confessional.

The scholarly literature on this subject is vast. Among other things, it has definitively debunked the story that at the Council of Nicea in 325, a bishop named Paphnutius supported and secured approval for the freedom for individual Churches to decide whether or not to permit conjugal life for priests. Just as it has been established that the Second Council of Trullo in 691 manipulated the canons of the African councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, canons it cites in support of conjugal life for priests: a manipulation exposed in the sixteenth century by the erudite cardinal Cesare Baronio.

But there is almost no trace of this scholarly literature in the current debate, nor in the statements of bishops and cardinals in favor of "moving past" celibacy.

An excellent historical and theological overview of the question can be found in a little book published in 1993 by Austrian cardinal Alfons Maria Stickler, who died in Rome in 2007 at the age of 97, at the time prefect of the Apostolic Vatican Library: Alfons Maria Stickler, "The Case for Clerical Celibacy. Its Historical Development and Theological Foundations", Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1995.

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## **Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven — The Case for Priestly Celibacy.**

Sandro Magister



Benedict XVI instituted the Year for Priests in order to restore spiritual vigor to Catholic priests.

"Moving past" the discipline of celibacy has long been the basso continuo of the music of the innovators.

In this music, just a couple of things are usually heard and understood.

The first is that the celibacy of the clergy is a rule imposed in recent centuries on the Latin clergy alone.

The second is that Catholic priests should be allowed to marry "as in the primitive Church."

The problem is that both of these things are at odds with history and theology.

Also at the heart of the error is a poor understanding of the concept of clerical celibacy.

Throughout the first millennium and also afterward, in the Church the celibacy of the clergy was properly understood as

"continence." Meaning as complete renunciation, after ordination, of conjugal life, even for those who had previously been married.

The ordination of married men, in fact, was a common practice, also documented by the New Testament. But in the Gospel, one reads that Peter, after his call to be an apostle, "left everything." And Jesus said that there are some who even leave "wives or children" for the Kingdom of God.

While in the Old Testament, the obligation of sexual purity applied to priests only during the periods of their service at the Temple, in the New Testament the following of Jesus in the priesthood is total, and consumes the entire person, always.

The fact that since the beginning of the Church priests and bishops were required to abstain from conjugal life is confirmed by the first rules written on the matter.

These began to appear in the fourth century, after the end of the persecutions. With the sharp rise in the number of the faithful, ordinations also increased, and with them the violations of continence.

Against these infractions, councils and popes intervened repeatedly to reaffirm the discipline they themselves called "traditional." This was done by the Council of Elvira in the first decade of the fourth century, which punished lack of respect for continence with exclusion from the clergy; other councils a century later; popes Siricius and Innocence I; and still other popes and Fathers of the Church, from Leo the Great to Gregory the Great, from Ambrose to Augustine to Jerome.

For many more centuries, the Western Church continued to ordain married men, but always demanded that they renounce conjugal life and separate from their wives, after receiving their consent. Infractions were punished, but they were very frequent and widespread. In part to combat this, the Church started trying to select its priests from among the celibate.

In the East, however, from the end of the seventh century onward the Church held firm the absolute obligation of continence only for bishops, who were increasingly chosen from among monks rather than from among married men. With the lower clergy, it allowed the married to continue leading a conjugal life, with the obligation of continence only "on the days of service at the altar and of the celebration of the sacred mysteries." This was established by the Second Council of Trullo in 691, a council never recognized as ecumenical by the Western Church.

From then until now, this is the discipline that has been in effect in the East, as also in the Churches of the Eastern rite that have returned to communion with the Church of Rome since the schism of 1054: absolute continence for bishops, and conjugal life permitted for the lower clergy. On the condition that marriage must always precede sacred ordination, and never follow it.

The tolerance adopted by the Eastern Churches for the conjugal life of the lower clergy was encouraged – according to the historians – by the particular organization of these Churches, which were constituted as patriarchates and were therefore more

inclined to make autonomous decisions on the disciplinary level, with a prominent role played by the political authority.

In the West, however, the Church reacted to the great political and religious crisis of the eleventh and twelfth centuries – with the reform called "Gregorian," from the name of Pope Gregory VII – precisely by combating vigorously the two evils that were running rampant among the clergy: simony, meaning the buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices, and concubinage.

The Gregorian reform reconfirmed the discipline of continence in full. The ordination of celibate men was preferred more and more to that of married men. As for marriage celebrated after ordination – always strictly banned in both the East and the West – the Second Lateran Council of 1139 said this was not only illicit, but invalid.

The later crises of the Western Church also saw the question of clerical celibacy in the forefront. One of the first acts of the Protestant Reformation was precisely the abolition of celibacy. At the Council of Trent, there were some who were pushing for a dispensation from the obligation of celibacy for Catholic priests as well. But the final decision was to keep the traditional discipline in full force.

Not only that. The Council of Trent required all of the dioceses to institute seminaries for the formation of the clergy. The result was that ordinations of married men fell dramatically, almost to the point of disappearing. For four centuries, almost all of the priests and bishops in the Catholic Church have been celibate, with the sole