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*Clerical Celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church*

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As the Roman Catholic Church tries to deal with a growing number of stories of pedophilia by clergy and cover-up in the hierarchy, calls for the end of the required celibacy of the priesthood are heard with increasing frequency. Married clergy would not end the problem of pedophilia, however, since they are not directly linked. Few celibate individuals are pedophiles, and some married individuals are pedophiles, so a change in the marriage rules for priests would not end the problem of sexual molestation.

That said, however, it is also true that the Roman Catholic Church has not always required clerical celibacy, but only for the last thousand years. While this is a long time, it is only half the life of the Christian Church. It is true that celibacy, living in an unmarried state, has from the start received highest praise in Christian thought for all Christians. Paul endorsed the single state, but allowed marriage, in the famous passage, "It is better to marry than to burn with passion." But Peter, the Roman church founder, was married, for Jesus cured his ailing mother-in-law.

By the fourth century, various church councils passed legislation regarding clerical marriage. The earliest known rule came from the Council of Elvira in 306. During the fourth and fifth centuries, other councils made further pronouncements, especially regarding the higher clergy, those in major orders, deacons, priests and bishops.

The most important legislation on celibacy came later. During the 11th century a variety of moral problems came under scrutiny by a series of reform-minded pontiffs, and clerical marriage was at the forefront of their concerns. Many reformers even felt that a married priest could not properly serve God. Although clergy were in theory not to marry, the majority did, and generally only bishops could not openly keep wives. Among the reforms instituted by Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) was the prohibition of clerical marriage. Gregory's prohibition became total at the Second Lateran Council of 1139, which not only made clerical marriage illegal, but also invalid. Priests could no longer contract a valid marriage; their "wives" were concubines and any children were illegitimate.

Both the Council of Trent and the Vatican II council reaffirmed the prohibition.

Laws and practice varied greatly in the matter of clerical celibacy. Most clergy married and lived openly with their wives and children, at least until Lateran II. After that, married clergy became problematic, and over the centuries the public practice declined. Even though clergy became celibate by definition, that is, unmarried, it did not make them all chaste, refraining from sexual activity. Stories circulated of "housekeepers" and "nieces" living with the priest. The laity did not always approve of the idea of enforced celibacy, either.

In Spain the story goes that clergy were more or less forced to take wives, or technically concubines, using the argument that if priests had wives of their own, they would not pursue the wives of the laity. Ordinary people seem to have had a more realistic and accepting view of human nature than did canonists and theologians.

What can an understanding of the beginning of the vow of celibacy bring to any current discussion about the possibility of marriage for Roman Catholic priests? Most importantly, the prohibition of marriage came in the middle, not the beginning, of the church's history. It was made by papal and conciliar decree, and it could in the same way be unmade. Obvious political realities make this extremely unlikely, but if tomorrow the pope wanted to decree that clergy could marry, he could do so. This is church tradition and law, and it does not come from the magisterium, that is, it is not a matter of papal infallibility. The Greek Orthodox Church, which shared the first millennium of Christianity with the Roman Catholic Church before they split in 1054, has always allowed its priests, although not its bishops, to marry.

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