

Married Priesthood: Some Theological “Resonances”

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Introduction

As far as we know, this is the first time in history that this Catholic eparchy has held a conference, with the participation of bishop, priests, deacons, monastics and lay people, on the subject of married clergy (*status clericorum matrimonio iunctorum*) viewed in its own terms and in terms of its value for the whole Church. We would dare to say that it is the very first time that a conference was held about the theological and ecclesial significance of the married clergy.

There have, of course, been married priests for two thousand years; but contemporary writers lead us to think that nothing of the kind had been tried before. It is only natural to ask why this has taken place. All we must say at this point is that in the Western Church, since the eleventh century, there has been an extremely long list of theological and magisterial – as well as disciplinary, canonical, and spiritual – publications that defend the connection between celibacy and the ordained priesthood.² This literature rejects directly or, in any case, con-

¹ The original Italian version of this paper was given by the author at a conference held by the Eparchy of Piana degli Albanesi in Sicily. Prof. George Gallaro of the Byzantine Catholic Seminary of Sts. Cyril and Methodius in Pittsburgh kindly arranged a translation, which he submitted to *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*. In keeping with our standard editorial practices, this essay has been edited for both style and clarity.

² Perhaps the greatest recent example of this is Pope John Paul’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, where we are told that priestly ordination makes of the priest the sacramental sign, ontologically

tradicts the practice and, even more so, the theological meaning of the married clergy. In fact, in the Latin Church – in great measure – there came into being the implicit axiom that the *priesthood automatically entails celibacy*. Such an axiom is so widespread that it not only has survived the Second Vatican Council, but has become even more deep-rooted and more strongly propounded after it.

Post-Conciliar Changes in the Roman Theology of Celibacy

It seems incredible, but it is true. Precisely after the council, which had given an ecclesial and theological dignity to the married clergy that for century after century had been merely a tolerated and provisional practice, to be eventually eliminated, many have gone so far, on the relationship between priest and celibacy, as to utter statements that no one had dared say

configured not only to Christ, the head and shepherd of His people, but also to Christ as bridegroom of the Church to the extent that only the “celibate” priest is the full and true expression of the priestly ordination. Indeed, the following words must be brought to mind:

It is especially important that the priest understand the theological motivation of the Church’s law on celibacy. Inasmuch as it is a law, it expresses the Church’s will, even before the will of the subject expressed by his acceptance. But the will of the Church finds its ultimate motivation in the link between celibacy and sacred ordination, which configures the priest to Jesus Christ, the head and spouse of the Church. The Church, as the bride of Jesus Christ, wished to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ, her head and spouse, loved her. Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self in and with Christ to his Church and expresses the priest’s service to the Church in and with the Lord (*PDV*, no.29).

PDV has accomplished this apart not only from the sacramental tradition which has always linked the sign of Christ-the-spouse to matrimony but also apart from the existence of the Eastern tradition. *PDV*, moreover, glosses over the fact that the Latin tradition has had, and today in fact has, some married priests. The example of Eastern Catholics could be a corrective *aide memoire* to their Latin brothers here, but the former have failed to speak up – and when they do speak, even by very highly placed authorities, they seem to prefer to complain about married priests and to express their preference for the celibate clergy for reasons that are practical, albeit not just practical.

beforehand. The council had stated clearly that the married clergy had gained a greatly esteemed place in the history of the Church, and hence should be honored; that it is an authentic priesthood and arises from a divine call and from an ecclesial inspiration, just as the celibate priesthood; that it is a gift, namely a charism from God just like the celibate priesthood is; and that celibacy has special reasons of theological significance but remains nevertheless an ecclesiastical law. After all this, we have seen the appearance in 1992 of the apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis (PDV)*, which formally affirms the objectively-founded link between celibacy and priesthood. We want to stress the point: according to *PDV*, the Catholic Church, by imposing celibacy for the Latin Church, does not simply establish a law which has several motivations (of a practical and theological nature), but it adopts a norm based on the very meaning of ordination itself, which configures one ontologically to Christ, head, shepherd and bridegroom of the Church, and finds in celibacy its adequate parallel. In other words, the married priesthood becomes either an abnormal priesthood (in the sense that it does not correspond to what priestly ordination signifies ontologically speaking) and therefore is simply tolerated, or that it is a different kind of priesthood than the celibate priesthood. Before Vatican II no one had dared say as much.

We remember that when we pointed out this idea of *PDV* to the then-secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, he was extremely surprised and could not believe it himself. The same reaction we found in many others who remembered clearly centuries of theological manuals according to which the law of celibacy is merely an *ecclesiastical law*. And yet such texts as *PDV* strongly suggest a change in Latin theology and the documents of the Roman congregations confirm it repeatedly.

The Congregation for the Clergy has reiterated this point in its “Directory for the Ministry and the Life of the Priests,” *Tota Ecclesia* (1994), and has proceeded along these lines in its activities of formation, both those put into practice through internal courses as well as those propounded by means of monthly video-conferences.