

The Priesthood Series
Article 7 – Priestly celibacy (Part 2)

In the last article I began a discussion on the discipline of priestly celibacy and said that it is both *practical* and *theological*.

Celibacy is practical in that it would be very difficult to fulfill all the necessary functions of priesthood and also have time for a family. The priesthood is not simply a job that one can leave from at 5pm and have weekends off. Rather, the priesthood has great demands on time.

Additionally, as St. Paul says: “*The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided*” (1 Corinthians 7:32-34).

This text is a very practical statement, that the man who is unmarried can be about the affairs of the Lord rather than of the world. *But it also makes a very important change in the focus* of the celibate life, namely, celibacy is not simply “*For the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven*” (a cause), but for “*the Lord*” (a person). *And this must be the fundamental reason for priestly celibacy, that it is done out of love for a person, Christ the Lord.* Thus the celibate can say, “My soul is in love with Jesus Christ. Let others contribute to the preservation of the human race.”

And this leads us to the deeper theological meaning of celibacy. Celibacy is *a sign of our future union with Christ in heaven.* It is *a participation* here and now *in the heavenly marriage* of Christ and the Church.

Fr. Reniero Cantalamessa, in an essay on priestly celibacy, writes:

“What is needed, therefore, is a complete reversal of our mind-set, and this can happen only through renewed contact with the biblical and theological roots of this state of life.”

Thus, rather than asking, “What does the *culture* say about celibacy?”, we need to ask, “What do *God and the Scriptures* say about celibacy?”.

Most fundamentally, the link between priesthood and celibacy is established in Christ himself. It is indisputable (despite unhistorical Dan Brown type stories) that Jesus was unmarried. Thus, the link between priesthood and celibacy was established first in Christ himself, who is our “high priest” and the archetype of all priests. Thus, it cannot be “unnatural” or foreign to the idea of priesthood for a man to be celibate.

As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, “*The fact that Christ himself, the eternal priest, lived his mission even to the sacrifice of the Cross in the state of virginity constitutes the sure point of reference for understanding the meaning of the tradition of [priestly celibacy in] the Latin Church.*”

The two motives of Christ’s celibacy are: *Spiritual engendering* (rather than begetting human children), and *universality of love* (because Jesus does not have his own family he is free to love every individual as his own).

To be continued...