

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

Why does the Roman Catholic Church insist that priests be celibate? It can't be based on the example of the apostles, since Peter was married, as I recall.

Yes, you are right about the Twelve Apostles. We know Peter was married because he had a mother-in-law whom Jesus healed (Matt. 8:14, Mark 1:30, Luke 4:38). And the Pastoral Epistles say a bishop or a deacon should be "a man of one woman" (1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:5-6). This has traditionally been taken to exclude widowers who remarry but may just mean a man who is faithful to his wife. Either way, it is assumed the church leader will be married. But the most relevant biblical verse to the issue of clerical celibacy must be 1 Cor. 9:5: "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife who is a Christian sister, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" This verse would seem to settle the issue of mandatory clerical celibacy.

But despite the first generations of church leaders being married, as time went on, celibacy came to be highly valued and those who chose it were highly honored as more spiritual than the married. Sexuality and spirituality seem to have been seen as inversely proportional: the more sexual one is,

the less spiritual one can be.

The Council of Elvira (ca. 306) required Spanish bishops, priests and deacons to refrain from sexual relations with their wives (canon 33). The Council of Nicea (325) rejected mandatory clerical celibacy, but that did not stop the conviction of many that it was inappropriate for priests to have sex with their wives the night before celebrating Mass (Lev. 15:16-18; 22:4-7; 1 Sam. 21:4-6). There was also strong sentiment that once a priest had been ordained bishop, marital relations should cease. The two could still live together but without sex in what was termed "chaste marriage."

While regional synods like the Council of Clermont (535) and the Council of Tours (567) required chaste marriage for bishops, clerical celibacy was not mandated for the entire Western Church until the Second Lateran Council in 1139.

This whole ancient tradition of considering intimate sexual behavior as abhorrent and sexual abstinence as holy and virtuous was rejected by the

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Protestant Reformation. All branches of the Reformation rejected celibacy for clergy. In reaction to the Reformation, the (Roman Catholic) Council of Trent in 1563 insisted on the superiority of celibacy to marriage and set up the seminary system where adolescent boys could be trained for the priesthood and ordained having little opportunity for any sexual experience with women.

By the way, in the East, a different system developed: Priests and deacons may not marry after ordination. Those married before ordination may keep their wives, though they must abstain from sexual intercourse with them for a suitable period before serving as priests or deacons in the Divine Liturgy. Bishops must be celibate and therefore come from the ranks of the monks.

Are there reasons the Roman Catholic Church gives for requiring clerical celibacy? Of course. The Second Vatican Council (1962-5) said

unmarried clergy: "can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart;" can "more freely dedicate themselves to the service of God and humankind;" and are an eschatological sign, since their celibacy gives evidence of "the arrival of a new world."

Also the council said for clergy to engage in sexual relations renders them ritually unclean and subdues their spirit to carnal desires. The Second Vatican Council said sexual relations therefore is inconsistent with an encounter with the holy.

So the idea of sexuality being antithetical to spirituality endures. Perhaps the most basic question to be answered is, "Do we share the ancient belief that sexual behavior is antithetical to spirituality?" That was not the attitude of the early Church. It is not the attitude of Rabbinic Judaism. And, despite monasticism being an option within Anglicanism, it is not the attitude of the Episcopal Church today.

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com.

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