

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CELIBACY

HAS THE COMPULSORY CELIBACY of the Roman Catholic priesthood any support in Scripture? Rome says it has. Our reading of the Word of God leads us to an opposite conclusion. Rome builds her claim upon certain passages, which we shall examine.

His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given (Matthew 19:10, 11). Rome's interpretation of "**they to whom it is given**" is that it applies to the priesthood.

Our answer to this is that there is not the least indication in the passage or its context that this is so. What our Lord said is of general application; no question of the priesthood is involved.

Peter, a child of his times, felt that so positive a restriction of divorce was a yoke too heavy to bear. Ever outspoken, he said, "**If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.**" Our Lord's reply surely meant that celibacy for some would be more difficult. Then he went on to speak of some who were born impotent, of others who were made so by their masters, and others who for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven denied themselves the blessing of married life. His last word, "**He that is able to receive it, let him receive it,**" clearly indicates that in the divine purpose men are free to marry or remain single as they are led of God.

For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven (Matthew 22:30).

Our Lord had been faced with a problem by the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection. It was almost certainly a fictitious case of a woman who had married one of seven brothers. He had died leaving no children and according to the Mosaic Law she was married to the second, to raise up children for the first brother. The same thing happened with each brother, and at last the woman only was left, the widow of seven brothers, all with no children. Whose wife would she be in the resurrection? Our Lord's answer was that she would be the wife of none of them, because the relationship of husband and wife belongs to this life only, being ordained by God for the propagation of the race (Genesis 1:27, 28).

At death, the earthly relationships come to an end, having fulfilled the purpose for which they were given. In eternity, man becomes in this particular like the angels, who, not belonging to the earthly order, do not marry or give in marriage.

This passage of Scripture has nothing to do with priestly celibacy, but lays down principles for redeemed humanity as a whole.

For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I (I Corinthians 7:7, 8).

Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? (I Corinthians 9:5).

We gather that Paul had no wife when he wrote this letter to the Corinthians, and that he recommended the unmarried state, but claimed his individual right to be married in the Lord if he so chose.

His recommendation that certain Christians remain single was “**for the present distress**” (I Corinthians 7:26). Up to that time official persecution had come from the Jewish authorities only, affecting only those of Jewish ancestry, but soon the Roman persecutions were to begin in which family responsibilities would greatly add to the suffering Christians would be called upon to endure. Paul's words are almost an echo of our Lord's when He said to the daughters of Jerusalem:

Behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck (Luke 23: 29).

Paul recognized that every man has his own proper gift from God, one after this manner, another after that, endorsing the truth that married life is God's purpose for some and celibacy for others. Paul is not here addressing a company of priests, but the whole church at Corinth, with all that call upon the name of Jesus Christ in every place (I Corinthians 1:2).

Rome also quotes Revelation 14:4 as scriptural ground for the celibacy of the clergy:

These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb.

The reference is to a special group of people, but there is no indication that they represent the Roman Catholic priesthood. It is said of these, “**And in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God.**” However kindly we may think of the priests of Rome, we hesitate to apply this description to them. Even as the “fornication” of Revelation 14:8 is obviously spiritual, so is the “virginity” of verse 4: the contrast is between single-hearted faithfulness to the Lord and unfaithfulness. The marriage relationship is also used by the Apostle Paul as a picture of Christ and the Church.

I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ (II Corinthians 11:2).

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; . . . That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25, 27).

There is certainly more reason to link Revelation 14: 4 with “lay” followers of Christ, members of His body, than with the priesthood of Rome.

Nowhere in Scripture are preachers or church leaders forbidden to marry.

“Marriage is honorable in all” (Hebrews 13:4) and **“all”** includes apostles, popes, cardinals, bishops, and priests, as well as the laity.

The Lord Jesus Himself never taught compulsory celibacy. He attended the wedding at Cana of Galilee and thus sealed marriage as a holy institution (John 2:1-14). He clearly acknowledged that the married state was appointed by God from the beginning as a normal condition of life (Matthew 19:4, 5). He chose married men to be His apostles (Matthew 8:14). He implied that some of them at least had children, when He said,

Ye which have followed me . . . shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken . . . wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold (Matthew 19:28, 29).

Not once in His teaching did our Lord suggest that celibacy was a higher spiritual state than marriage. Paul regarded marriage as right and proper and said that children of believers are holy (I Corinthians 7:2, 14). He maintained his own right to marry, though an apostle, even if for the Gospel's sake he did not exercise this right (I Corinthians 9:5). He acknowledged that some of the apostles and some of the brethren of the Lord were married men (I Corinthians 9:5). He takes it for granted in his epistles and even makes it a requirement for some officers in the church to be married and have children (I Timothy 3:2-5, 12; Titus 1:5, 6). He uses marriage as a type of the relationship between Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:25-28). He couples **“forbidding to marry”** with other heresies, described as **“doctrines of devils,”** and foretells that this heresy would enter the church.

Compulsory celibacy for the Roman clergy was a gradual development. Although the early church fathers thought highly of celibacy, they never forbade the marriage of church leaders. The next step was that when a priest became a widower, he was not permitted to remarry. Following this, the marriage of priests was discouraged, though not forbidden. Next, marriage was forbidden after ordination. Complete prohibition came in 1075. In 1139 the Tenth General Council disannulled all existing marriages of priests and ordered them to leave the women so divorced, also commanding Roman Catholic congregations not to attend masses celebrated by married priests.

The Council of Trent pronounced a curse upon all who said that the marriage of priests was lawful and right.

The era when celibacy was most highly esteemed was the greatest darkness in Christendom, the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Though in different places and at different times movements have been started in the Roman church to legalize the marriage of priests, none has succeeded in gaining the consent of the highest church courts.

The immorality among the priesthood that resulted from the prohibition of marriage is a matter of history. Often, at the highest levels in the Roman hierarchy, celibacy has not been a synonym for chastity.

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