

Q: Why can't Roman Catholic priests marry or be married? Isn't it unnatural? Weren't some of the Apostles married?

A fair question, especially given the times we live in. Let's start by explaining exactly what the Church teaches on this.

There are many "Rites" or ethnic churches within the Catholic Church –think of them along the lines of cultural divisions within the universal Church -but in truth, they are much more profound than that. In the Latin-Rite Church (i.e. Roman), the practice is for priests not to marry or be married. But for example, in Eastern Rite churches like the Byzantine Rite, married men can be ordained to the Priesthood. It is also possible for married Anglican clergy that convert to the Roman Catholic Church to also be ordained as Catholic priests. So what gives here? Why all the variability on what seems to be a key area of discussion these days?

Unlike the doctrines of the Church, which are the actual teachings handed down by Jesus and His Apostles and cannot change, Priestly Celibacy falls under the category of discipline in the Latin Church. Disciplines are teachings or guidelines put in place by the Church through her good judgment and by the authority given to her by Jesus Himself to "bind" her teachings "on Earth" (cf Mat 16:19 and Matthew 18:17-18). They are given for the pastoral good of the faithful, and are not "optional", but must be faithfully observed.

But unlike doctrines and dogmas (dogmas are simply doctrines that have been officially defined/clarified by the Church over the centuries), disciplines *can* be changed by the Church over time. Examples include the length of fast before communion (now it is 1 hour, not too long ago, it started at midnight on Saturday), and abstaining from meat on Friday. Disciplines can also vary from Rite to Rite, even country to country.

Now the next question is, *why* does the Roman/Latin Church generally require celibacy of its priests?

It is true that in the early Church, some of the Apostles and priests were married. But very early on, the Church was keenly aware of the wisdom of this discipline of priestly celibacy. This discipline was formally instituted in the early 300's, but recent evidence suggests that it may actually be of Apostolic origin. St Paul writes clearly in favor of it in 1 Corinthians 7:7,38, saying: "*I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God.... he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.*" Note that St Paul refers to celibacy here as a "gift"!

Jesus also spoke of it in Matthew 19:12, where he clearly recommends celibacy to those who can accept it: "*Some are incapable of marriage because.... they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. **Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.***"

In Mark 12:24-25, Jesus would also confirm that in heaven, people would not actually be “married” as we know it. *“Jesus said to them, ‘When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven’”*.

In fact, this is part of the spiritual dimension of priestly celibacy. Priests are “conformed to Christ” in many ways. Included in this is following Jesus’ example of taking up a celibate life that more closely and perfectly parallels the heavenly life we are preparing for while on Earth. They have given up something “good” (marriage), for something even better –total devotion to Jesus and His Church. In a sense, they marry the Church –“the Bride of Christ”.

And there are some practical considerations as well. Ask any married clergy whether it is difficult to have two “families”, his natural family and his congregation. Many that I’ve talked to and read about admit that it is tough, and their time and loyalties can be torn. *“I want you to be free from anxieties. 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”,* St Paul would write in 1 Corinthians 7:32-33. As a married man and father of four, I can wholeheartedly attest to this!

Now what about the sexual abuse scandals in the Church? Many contend that it is largely the result of this discipline of celibacy. But this cannot be. Why? Because Jesus clearly calls for it in Matthew 19:12 above. Recall, *“Some.... have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. **Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.**”* And we also saw earlier how St Paul, celibate himself, appeals strongly for the same (1 Corinthians 7:7-38).

When we examine the research (and space permits only a cursory overview here), in fact, it shows that sexual abuse has a much higher percentage of occurrence in Protestant churches than within celibate Catholic clergy -and this according to Protestant research! (cf Christian Ministry Resource’s 9 year U.S. study; also “Pedophiles and Priests”, Philip Jenkins). When we look to the secular world, again, research shows that the percentage of abuse is much higher among non-celibates than among celibate Catholic clergy. If celibacy were at the root of things, we would expect the opposite. Jesus picks 12 as his first priests, and one is Judas. We should expect difficulties and temptations to come –and some, sadly will fall in this area.

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And finally, some suggest that we would have many more vocations to the priesthood if we allowed married men to apply. First of all, the Church relies on the Holy Spirit to discern such decisions, and so we trust the Holy Spirit to guide the Church in these matters, just as Jesus promised in John 14 through 16.

Secondly, God has been calling men to priestly celibacy by the thousands for centuries now. There is no reason to think He has stopped this in our time. More likely, the onslaught of secular, worldly influences is muffling God's call, and the faithful, devout family life that can be so helpful in nurturing this vocation seems to be in the minority these days. Perhaps we need to look in part to ourselves and the surrounding culture as the problem. And do we all truly ask the master of the harvest to send more laborers for the harvest, as Jesus has told us to do in Luke 10:2?

So is it possible that some day this discipline of priestly celibacy might change? Possibly, but not likely. There is spiritual wisdom at work here -and infinite practicality. And if Jesus commends it, St Paul recommends it, and the Church confirms it, who are we to argue?

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