

# Why do vows of celibacy remain?

**Q.** Dear Father Francis, I have difficulty understanding why priests still take a vow of celibacy. It seems to me that this practice has "run its course" and that allowing priests to marry would solve a number of problems. Why is this a discipline the Church continues to uphold?

**A.** The discipline of priestly celibacy is among the Church's more ancient and debated practices. It has been upheld for centuries as a spiritual commitment deeply rooted in Jesus Christ's example and the Church's tradition, with spiritual and practical benefits for both the priest and the Church.

The practice of priestly celibacy began to take formal shape in the fourth century at the Council of Elvira. It was later affirmed by the Second Council of the Lateran in 1139 as a universal discipline for priests in the Latin Rite.

Yet, this practice has faced criticism since its inception,

with many questioning its relevance and practicality. Critics cite issues such as the shortage of priests, the loneliness experienced by some clergy and the changing cultural attitudes toward celibacy.

The Church has responded to these criticisms with some flexibility but still maintains priestly celibacy as the norm. Despite its challenges, priestly celibacy remains a profound expression of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love.

Building on its sacred tradition, the Church continues to uphold priestly celibacy not as an arbitrary rule but as a reflection of deep

theological principles. At the heart of priestly celibacy is the example of Jesus Christ, who lived a celibate life, fully dedicating Himself to the mission of salvation.

Priests, as spiritual successors of Christ, are called to imitate Christ in all things, especially by embodying His self-sacrificial love and singular devotion to God. In this way, celibacy allows priests to mirror Christ's total gift of self, becoming a visible sign of His presence in the world.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul emphasizes how celibacy enables an undivided focus on serving the Lord: "The

unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord" (1 Cor 7:32-35). This teaching has been echoed throughout Church history. Early Church Fathers, including St. Augustine and St. Jerome, viewed celibacy as a higher calling, a way of dedicating oneself entirely to God and His people.

The eschatological dimension of priestly celibacy further enriches its theological significance. By renouncing marriage and family, priests bear witness to the coming Kingdom of God, where human relationships are transcended by perfect union with God.

Jesus tells us that in the heavenly kingdom, we "neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Mt 22:30). In this sense, celibacy is not an outright rejection of marriage but an anticipation of the eternal life to come.

Canon 277 of *The Code of Canon Law* summarizes all of this, stating that priests "are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are bound to celibacy which is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and are able to dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and humanity."

While celibacy is primarily a spiritual discipline, it also has practical benefits for the priesthood. A celibate priest can dedicate himself entirely to his ministry, unencumbered by the responsibilities of marriage and family life.

This availability allows priests to serve their communities more effectively,

providing pastoral care, celebrating the sacraments and addressing the spiritual needs of their parishioners.

Priestly celibacy also fosters a sense of solidarity among the clergy. Sharing the same commitment to celibacy creates a bond of mutual support and encouragement, particularly in moments of difficulty.

Additionally, the flexibility afforded by celibacy allows priests to respond quickly to the needs of the Church, even in the most remote, challenging or unusual circumstances. From missionaries serving in isolated areas to pastors managing large parishes, celibacy enables a singular focus on their vocation where the demands of family life could pose significant challenges.

It is important, however, to remember that priestly celibacy is an adopted discipline, not an inflexible or unchangeable dogma. This distinction means that it is a practice that could be reexamined in response to changing pastoral needs.

For instance, married men may be ordained in Eastern Catholic Churches, and exceptions have been made in the Latin Rite for married Protestant ministers who convert to Catholicism.

Men already married may also be ordained to the permanent diaconate, which Pope St. Paul VI instituted in its current form in 1967! These examples highlight the Church's willingness to adapt while preserving the spiritual essence and importance of celibacy.

In all three examples, the married and ordained man must maintain the chastity appropriate to married life. Nonetheless, celibacy in the Latin Rite is maintained as a sign of devotion and a source of spiritual power.

Optional celibacy, while a topic of ongoing discussion, must be approached with care to ensure that the spiritual and pastoral dimensions of the priesthood are not compromised.

Since its inception, priestly celibacy has been widely criticized despite its theological and practical merits.

One of the most common arguments is that celibacy contributes to the decline in priestly vocations, especially in the Western world. Many suggest that allowing priests to marry could attract more candidates to the priesthood and alleviate the growing shortage of clergy.

While declining vocations are a valid concern, celibacy is not their sole cause. They stem from multiple factors, including societal secularization, changing cultural values and a general misunderstanding of the priesthood.

Moreover, declining vocations in Eastern Catholic rites and other Christian traditions, where married clergy are permitted, demonstrate that the availability of marriage does not necessarily lead to an abundance of vocations.

Priestly celibacy is more than a rule — it's a unique calling, a vocation within a vocation. Just as married life is a calling to self-giving love and fidelity, celibacy is also a response to God's invitation

to love fully and sacrificially, though differently.

Where married couples dedicate themselves to their spouses and families, priests dedicate themselves entirely to God and the Church. Both vocations reflect God's boundless love in unique ways: marriage through the union of spouses and family and celibacy through the priest's undivided devotion to Christ and His Church.

We live in a world that often prioritizes individual fulfillment and material success. Celibacy is a countercultural witness against this paradigm, challenging societal norms and pointing to a higher reality of self-giving love and eternal life with God.

By living celibate lives, priests embody the radical call of discipleship and remind us of our ultimate destiny.

Celibacy also offers a unique spiritual freedom, enabling priests to serve God and His people with an undivided heart. This witness is significant, especially in our fragmented and distracted world where total commitment *to anything* is increasingly, and unfortunately, rare.

Priests who embrace celibacy provide a living testimony to the transformative power of faith and the hope of eternal life.

Celibacy is not merely a relic of the past but a living, countercultural witness of the Gospel. It reflects the life of Christ, anticipates the eternal union with God and empowers priests to serve the faithful with undivided hearts.

We must foster a deeper understanding of its spiritual and practical significance in a world that often

misunderstands or dismisses such a commitment. While criticisms and challenges persist, the enduring value of priestly celibacy lies in its radical proclamation of faith, hope and love in a fragmented and distracted world.

Rather than rejecting this ancient discipline, we must rediscover its profound meaning and relevance for our time. As the Church looks to the future, priestly celibacy continues to serve as a profound witness to the Gospel.

Through prayer, understanding and support, we can help ensure that this discipline remains a source of strength and grace for the Church and its faithful.

Pray for your priests and pray that there will be more of them. Remember that the priests in our lives are human beings, which means they may not always live up to our expectations.

When those moments come, take them as an opportunity to pray for them and also to reach out to them and offer a helping hand or a listening ear. ■



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