

LOCAL NEWS

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One question raised recently concerns married Catholic clergy, and possibly because I am a married priest, one person asked me if there have ever been any married popes.

Yes, but remarkably few. And it should be noted that just because there is a historical example for something doesn't always mean it's a good idea.

First on the list of married Catholic leaders is the Apostle Peter, the first bishop of Rome. That Peter was married seems certain, because in I Corinthians 9:5, Paul grumbles that many of the apostles had the right to travel openly with their wives including Cephas, or Peter.



Gregory Elder

The first chapter in the Gospel of Mark records that Jesus visited the house of and healed Peter's mother-in-law 1:29-31.

St. Clement of Alexandria, who lived from 150-215 AD, tells us that he had to watch his wife die in the arena, but he encouraged her faith.

In early medieval times, legend would give Peter a daughter, appropriately named Petronilla. In fact, there was a St. Petronilla in Rome in the first century but there is no certainty that she was actually Peter's biological child or a spiritual child.

Several popes were married in their younger years but took holy orders after losing their wives. One was Pope Hormisdas, who ruled from 514-523. Much of his administration was spent not with family but arguing with various heretics in attempts to return them to the Church.

He also had to deal with doctrinal meddling by the Byzantine Emperor. His son Silverius also became Pope in 536. Unfortunately, an evil priest named Vigilius betrayed poor Silverius, and exiled the pope to a remote island named Palmarola where the pontiff died of starvation in 538. Vigilius seized the papal throne for himself.

Another widower who became pope was John XVII, who was pontiff for seven months in 1003 AD. John had to struggle with Roman nobles who supported a rival claimant to the papal throne. He did not last long in the job, but all three of his sons became priests. More fortunate was the widowed Clement IV who ruled from 1265-68. He had the usual political struggles with local nobles but was a patron and protector of the great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas and the English Franciscan priest and scientist Roger Bacon.

Adrian II, who was elected in 867, was another married pope. He was an elderly man at the time of his selection but was still married to his wife, Stephania. The couple had two daughters and the whole family lived together in the Lateran Palace in Rome. Adrian II had to contend with both Frankish kings and the Byzantine Emperor Basil to preserve the papal states. Unfortunately, the pope lost the struggle and he was placed in confinement. His enemies captured and murdered his family.

This was not to say that these men did anything illicit. Their marriages either ended before ordination, or they and their wives were simply accepted as exceptions to the general rule of celibacy.

There were, however, other popes who were quite sexual in unapproved manners. The most flamboyant was the celebrated Borgia, Pope Alexander VI who ruled from 1492 to 1503. He fathered several sons by different mistresses. He made one son, Cesare Borgia, a cardinal. His private life was certainly corrupt and his lavish lifestyle offended many, however, he was highly educated, a supremely good administrator and he kept the kings of Naples and France at bay. Later popes admired his management style, although not his lifestyle.

Other popes had mistresses and fathered children.

Several more were accused of being either bisexual or homosexual, however, it is impossible to tell if these accusations, generally made by their enemies, were true.

But in all honesty, there were more than one or two who never should have been elected. Perhaps the less said the better concerning Pope John XII in a family newspaper. This John ruled from 955 to 963, and one of his biographers called him, “a Christian Caligula whose crimes were rendered particularly horrific by the office he held.” Let us just say that he was the life of the party.

Advocates for married clergy today claim that there were as many as 39 married popes. However, the paucity of evidence offered does not always back this claim up. The great majority of the 266 popes were single and good men, and some quite saintly.

Considerable numbers of people have asked me if the Catholic Church will ever change its policy on celibacy.

I can only reply, “I have absolutely no idea. Go ask my wife.”

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