

The Theological and Ecclesial Meaning of Married Priesthood: Some Reflections

1. Introduction

As far as I know, this is the first time in history that a Catholic Academic Institution has held a conference on the subject of married clergy viewed as a theological reality in itself and as a value for the entire Church.

There have been married priests for two thousand years; yet, as far as I know, nothing of this kind had been tried before in the academic field. It is only natural to ask why this has taken place. All we must say at this point is that in the Western Church, since the eleventh century, there is an extremely long list of theological and magisterial, as well as disciplinary, canonical and spiritual publications that defend the connection between celibacy and the ordained priesthood. This literature rejects directly or, in any case, contradicts the practice and, even more so, the theological meaning of the married clergy. In fact, in the Latin Church – in great measure – there came into being a kind of conditioned reflex: the word “priesthood” calls immediately to mind the word “celibacy”. Such reflex is so widespread that it not only has survived the Second Vatican Council, which had all the theoretical premises to uproot it, but has become even more deep-rooted and more strongly propounded after the Council.

2. Departure from the Council's Position in the Roman Theology of Celibacy

It seems incredible, but it is true. Precisely after the Council, which had given an ecclesial and

theological dignity to the married clergy (for century after century it had been viewed only as a tolerated and provisional practice, to be eventually eliminated), many have gone so far, on the relationship between priest and celibacy, as to utter statements that no one had dared say beforehand.

After the Council had stated clearly – I can only make a reference to my book: *Preti sposati per volontà di Dio?*¹ – that the married clergy had gained an esteemed place in the history of the Church, and hence it had to be honored; that it is an authentic priesthood and arises from a divine call and from an ecclesial inspiration, just as the celibate priesthood and that, as a consequence, it is a gift, namely a charism from God just like the celibate priesthood is and that celibacy has special reasons of theological significance but remains nevertheless an ecclesiastical law, we have seen the appearance in 1992 of the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*² which formally affirms the objectively/sacramentally-founded link between celibacy and priesthood. I want to stress the point: according to PDV the Catholic Church by imposing celibacy for the Latin rite does not simply establish a law which has several motivations (of a practical and functional nature) and a theological convenience, as

1 B. PETRÀ: *Preti sposati per volontà di Dio? Saggio su una chiesa a due polmoni*, Bologna: EDB, 2004.

2 JOHN PAUL II: *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992), retrieved from: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html; accessed 21.09.2014; henceforward abbreviated as PDV.

was said beforehand, but it adopts a norm based on the very meaning of ordination itself because it states that the priestly ordination configures one ontologically to Christ, head, shepherd and bridegroom of the Church and finds in celibacy its adequate parallel:

It is especially important that the priest understand the theological motivation of the Church's law on celibacy. Inasmuch as it is a law, it expresses the Church's will, even before the will of the subject expressed by his acceptance. But the will of the Church finds its ultimate motivation in the link between celibacy and sacred ordination, which configures the priest to Jesus Christ, the head and spouse of the Church. The Church, as the bride of Jesus Christ, wished to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and spouse loved her. Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self in and with Christ to his Church and expresses the priest's service to the Church in and with the Lord. (PDV, 29)

In other words, the married priesthood becomes – following PDV – either an abnormal priesthood (in the sense that it does not correspond to what priestly ordination signifies ontologically speaking) and therefore is simply tolerated, or that it is a different kind of priesthood than the celibate priesthood.

Before Vatican II no one had dared say as much. And yet the texts prove it unmistakably and the documents of the Roman congregations confirm it repeatedly.

The Congregation for the Clergy has reiterated this point in its *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of the Priests* (in the first edition of 1994³ as well as in the second edition of 2013⁴) and has proceeded along these lines in all its activities of formation and teaching.

Just an example. On February 24, 2007 the Congregation published *A Reflection by Cardinal Claudio Hummes on the Occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the Encyclical 'Sacerdotalis Caelibatus' of Pope Paul VI: The Radical Importance of the Graced Gift of Priestly Celibacy*.⁵

It is not my intention to discuss the way *Sacerdotalis caelibatus* is interpreted in this *Reflection*,

fully based upon the work of scholars like Cochini, Stickler, Ignace de la Potterie. “Scholars note that the origins of priestly celibacy date back to apostolic times”, so we read in the first sentences.

I want just to underline some of cardinal Hummes' words. So with reference to the three reasons given by pope Paul VI for celibacy (christological, ecclesiological, eschatological) he says:

[about the first reason] Christ, by calling his priests to be ministers of salvation, that is, of the new creation, calls them to be and to live in newness of life, united and similar to him in the most perfect way possible. From this derives the gift of sacred celibacy as the fullest configuration with the Lord Jesus and a prophecy of the new creation.

[about the second reason] like Christ and in Christ, the priest mystically weds the Church and loves the Church with an exclusive love. Thus, dedicating himself totally to the affairs of Christ and of his Mystical Body, the priest enjoys ample spiritual freedom to put himself at the loving and total service of all people without distinction.

[about the third reason] Thus, the theme of the eschatological meaning of celibacy is revealed as a sign and a prophecy of the new creation, in other words, of the definitive Kingdom of God in the *parousia*, when we will all be raised from the dead...Virginity, lived for love of the Kingdom of God, is a special sign of these 'final times', because the Lord announced that 'in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven'.

And the married clergy? There is en passant a reference to the Tradition of Eastern Churches, only because is in a quotation from Paul VI's encyclical. So, nothing is directly told about married clergy. But we find very interesting and revealing words about marriage and family life.

A first statement: “While the Sacrament of Marriage roots the Church in the present, immersing her totally in the earthly realm which can thus become a possible place for sanctification, celibacy refers immediately to the future, to that full perfection of the created world that will be brought to complete fulfilment only at the end of time.”

And at the end of the *Reflection* cardinal Hummes quotes Benedict XVI, precisely his *Address at the Audience with the Roman Curia for the Exchange of Christmas Greetings*, 22 December 2006⁶, the following assertion: “Basing one’s life on him, renouncing marriage and family, means that I accept and experience God as a reality and that I can therefore bring him to men and women.”

So, there is no doubt that only a celibate priest can be a true priest, completely faithful and corresponding to his new “priestly” being in Christ, to the real configuration of his being by ordination.

This *Reflection* shows the extent of the change undergone, in Roman quarters, by the theology of celibacy: apostolic origin, objective link with ordination based on the ontological configuration to Christ spouse of the Church which is effected in the candidate, elaboration of theological motivations which confirm the intimate and in fact inevitable link between celibacy and priesthood.

3. *Silence on the Subject on the Part of the Eastern Catholic Churches*

It needs to be added – however – that, while the Roman Congregations proceeded (and still proceed) peacefully along the lines outlined by new approach of PDV, the Eastern Catholic Churches – and in particular the Congregation for the Eastern Churches – did not do much to point out that married clergy is not an archaic reality, a discipline tolerated for practical reasons but lacking theological meaning, a practice to be rather kept hidden away, while instead it has a theological significance, since it was born from the direct will of God, it constitutes an act of fidelity to the Lord on a par with the call to the celibate priesthood.

The silence of the Eastern Catholic Churches is unforgivable. Both the first edition of *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of the Priests* (no. 60) and the second edition (no. 82) use just the same

words to present the eastern tradition: “The discipline of the Eastern Churches which admit the married clergy is not opposed to the discipline of the Latin Church. In fact the Eastern Churches themselves demand celibacy for their bishops. Moreover, they do not allow the marriage of already ordained priests and do not allow a second marriage for widowed priests.”

This is indeed a strange presentation: the practice of a married clergy is interpreted as a confirmation of the fact that celibacy is intimately linked to priesthood, since only the celibates imitate Christ and live like the apostles did. The proof is found in some elements which are specific canonical obstacles existing at the present time in the Eastern practice (which obstacles, by the way, are of diverse and debated origin), without mentioning anything about its theological significance.

In the final analysis the suggestion prevails that even in the East the true priesthood, the one considered in its fullness, can only be the celibate priesthood and that the married priesthood is substantially tolerated even in the East.

Now, therefore, even granting for the sake of argument (but not totally conceding) that the

- 3 CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY: *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 31 January 1994, retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_31011994_directory_en.html; accessed 21.09.2014.
- 4 CONGREGAZIONE PER IL CLERO: *Direttorio per il ministero e la vita dei presbiteri*, nuova edizione, 11 February 2013, retrieved from: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_20130211_direttorio-presbiteri_it.html; accessed 21.09.2014. Unfortunately, the site doesn’t offer an English official text.
- 5 C. HUMMES: *The Radical Importance of the Graced Gift of Priestly Celibacy*, 22 February 2007, retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_20070224_hummes-sacerdotalis_en.html; accessed 21.09.2014.
- 6 BENEDICT XVI: *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Members of the Roman Curia at the Traditional Exchange of Christmas Greetings*, Clementine Hall, 22 December 2006, retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20061222_curia-romana.html; accessed 21.09.2014.

elements above mentioned do prove a certain emphasis given to celibacy even in the East, does the persistence of a married clergy – strenuously defended – lack any positive significance? Does it lack a theological value? Is it not a true priesthood? Is it not the result of a call from God? Is the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (CCEO) perhaps the child of a lesser god? And is Benedict XVI wrong (or doesn't he know what he is saying) when in the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*⁷ he tells all the priests (both married, especially, and celibate): “By his ordination the priest is configured to Christ and becomes a close collaborator of the Patriarch and Bishop in whose threefold *munus* he shares” (no. 45; the pope refers to PO, 4-6); “Dear priests, I invite you to rediscover each day the ontological dimension of Holy Orders, which inspires you to live the priesthood as a source of sanctification for the baptized and for the betterment of every man and woman. Tend the flock of God that is your charge...not for shameful gain, but eagerly (1 Pet 5:2)” (no. 47).

4. *From the Eastern View of the Married Clergy to the Determination of its Theological Significance in the Catholic Church*

4.1. *The Roots and the Perspectives of the Eastern Doctrine of the Married Priesthood*

Looking at the origins of the Eastern tradition, it is easy to perceive that, in maintaining a married priesthood, the value of fidelity to the apostolic mandate has always been preserved as attested by the pastoral letters of the Pauline corpus (1Tim 3,2; Titus 1,6). As a consequence the analogy between management of the home and management of the church highlighted by the pastoral letters was clearly kept in mind. The ability of being a good spouse and a good parent is a solid indication of the ability to manage the ecclesial family unit as well. In a way, the logic of the pastoral letters seems to indicate that the married priesthood reveals the family character

of the ecclesial community, so much so that a discerning criterion of the managing ability of the candidate to the priesthood is precisely his ability to be a good husband and a good father, albeit within the limitations of the family culture of the first century after Christ.

It is therefore inevitable that the pastoral letters outline a concept of the married priesthood as linked to an exemplary realization of a priestly family both in the aspect of the relationship man/woman as well as in the aspect of the relationship father/children. This necessity of the exemplary quality of the priestly family can explain why the monogamy of the priests and of their wives is conceived as absolute, at least in principle (see the rules for the admission to the clergy and the marriage of widowed priests), and why the life of a priestly family must be in perfect keeping with an exemplary Christian life. On this, both Orthodox as well as Eastern Catholic authors completely agree.⁸

Up to this point we have spoken of the married clergy and of what is traditionally required of them. However, we have not yet considered what could appropriately be called the *theological meaning* of the married condition of the clergy. This development needs a brief explanation.

4.2. *Searching for the Theological Significance of the Married Clergy*

When we speak of theological significance, we mean to say that certain realities/conditions are intimately if not essentially connected with the mystery of salvation in Christ, the paschal mystery, and that they express some aspects of it adequately.

Our problem therefore – which *as such* hasn't made a clear appearance in history – is precisely this: is there a theological meaning to the married clergy as married, or is it just a simple disciplinary practice based on the particular history of eastern tradition but devoid of any theological value, whether Christological or ecclesial or eschatological as Roman theology attributes to celibacy of the celibate priests?

But married priests are not only a consequence of a simple disciplinary norm of the Church. *Presbiterorum ordinis*, no. 16 clearly states that married priests are divinely called: they have received a holy vocation (*sancta vocatio*): “While recommending ecclesiastical celibacy this sacred Council does not by any means aim at changing that contrary discipline which is lawfully practiced in the Eastern Churches. Rather the Council affectionately exhorts all those who have received the priesthood in the married state to persevere in their holy vocation and continue to devote their lives fully and generously to the flock entrusted to them.” If married priesthood is God’s will, that is a divine call, recognized by the Church as such (and the CCEO can. 195, 329 etc. speaks about that), then it is not only a disciplinary decision but an ecclesial decision in the Spirit for the good of the entire Church, that is for the salvation of man.

Sic stantibus rebus, from where must we begin our research in order to discover the theological meaning of married priesthood?

In my opinion, in order to identify the theological value of the married clergy we must begin from a key and permanent element of the Eastern tradition: those who are called to the married priesthood in reality are called to a spiritual path that, in the first place, is characterized by a conjugal/family form of life; and upon *the solidity and continuity* of such form they get to the priestly mandate.

In the Eastern tradition it is a permanent practice that marriage must precede ordination. Moreover, ordination does not change the matrimonial/family way of life but it configures it according to the pastoral needs of the priestly mandate in the community. Therefore, married priesthood and Christian marriage are not mutually exclusive but have aspects of such continuity that the sacramental aspect of marriage can merge into the sacramental character of the priesthood without losing anything.

As each subsequent sacrament is at once continuation and further development of previous elements, so also marriage and married priesthood

complement each other and in some way develop into each other.

We can comprehend this point today as never before, since we possess a theology of marriage that has brought to Catholic awareness elements not clearly perceived previously. *In other words, today we are capable of better understanding the relationship between marriage and priesthood in the way they have been maintained in the Eastern tradition, because we have a theological awareness of marriage much deeper than in the past.*

In fact, in the present-day teaching of the Church, marriage is not simply a natural contract

- 7 BENEDICT XVI: *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, 14 September 2012, retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20120914_ecclesia-in-medio-oriente.html; accessed 21.09.2014.
- 8 For instance, Stephanos Charalambidis, Bishop of Nazianzus, speaking about the married priesthood in Orthodoxy, clearly states: “All the canonical norms concerning married priests which are in force in the Orthodox Church to this day, fully agree with the Christian ideal of an absolute monogamy. For priests this becomes a formal necessity...” ST. CHARALAMBIDIS, VESCOVO DI NAZIANZE, *Ministeri e carismi nella Chiesa ortodossa*, Editrice Ancora: Milano, 1994, 98. Philotheos Pharos, a Greek theologian and psychologist, a celibate priest, sums up the traditional exemplary role of the married priest from the point of view of family management and parental role in this way: “A priest is bound to have a notably exemplary family life because, according to the Apostle Paul, *If one does not know how to control his family, how can he look after God’s people?* (1 Tim 3:5). And John Chrysostom adds: ‘For he who cannot be the instructor of his own children, how could he be a teacher to others?’ (Homily II on Titus, PG 62: 679); and elsewhere he continues: ‘He must see that his children are obedient and always respectful’ (1 Tim 3:4). Good example has to be exhibited in his house. For who would believe that he who had not his own son in control, would keep a stranger under command?” “Church leaders must be in control of their own families (1 Tim 3:4). Even pagans say this, that he who is a good steward of a house will be a good leader. For the Church is, as it were, a small household, and as in a house there are children and a wife and domestics, and the man has rule over them all, just so in the Church there are women, children, and servants. And as he who presides in the Church has partners in his powers, so in his house has the man a partner, that is, his wife (Homily X on 1 Tim, PG 62: 549-550).” PH. PHAROS, *Klêros: Mia anekplêrôtê hyposchesê patrotêtos* (= *Clergy: An Unfulfilled Promise of Paternity*), Akritas: Nea Smyrni, 1992, 243-245.

– which is blessed and elevated to the level of sacrament – binding man and woman for the purpose of procreation and education of the offspring. It is much more: it is a covenant/communion of life and conjugal love, *the fulfillment of the uniduality* between man and woman⁹ which, celebrated as it is in the Church, is elevated to signify the very communion between God and man, between Christ and his Church, and even the Trinitarian communion. Not only, Christian marriage becomes a true manifestation of the Church, and Christian spouses are a church that is fulfilled in the conjugal and family communion. “The Christian family as a ‘Church in miniature’ is in its own way a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church” (*Familiaris consortio*, 49)¹⁰.

Two aspects in particular need to be considered and stressed. The first aspect concerns the kind of union that originates between the spouses by virtue of their total self-giving in matrimonial love. It is a deep and intimate union which can be called a kind of “one-in-two”, an “uniduality” as Benedict XVI says.¹¹

The second aspect is that the marriage-sacrament and the family that issues from it, in the light of modern theology, is not simply a reality *in* the Church, as rather a reality “which *is* the Church”, namely its actuation and symbol.

This aspect was particularly developed and expressed in *Familiaris consortio*. For this reason we will dwell on this Apostolic Exhortation.

Thus we read at no. 49: “The Christian family is grafted into the mystery of the Church to such a degree as to become a sharer, in its own way, in the saving mission proper to the Church. By virtue of the sacrament, Christian married couples and parents ‘in their state and way of life have their own special gift among the people of God’ (LG 11). For this reason they not only *receive* the love of Christ and become a *saved* community, but they are also called upon to *communicate* Christ’s love to their brethren, thus becoming a *saving* community. In this way, while the Christian family is a fruit and sign of the supernatural fecundity of the Church, it

stands also as a symbol, witness and participation of the Church’s motherhood (LG 41).”

Therefore the Christian family communion shares the Church’s mission by way of its own characteristics, building up the kingdom of God (FC 50) and fulfilling the threefold ministry of Christ, as prophet, priest and king.

For this reason the Christian family must be a “believing and evangelizing community”. Within and outside the family environments, the spouses have a mission of spreading the Gospel and catechizing. Indeed, they are endowed with a universal missionary task. Therefore, “just as in the dawn of Christianity, so also today the Church shows forth her perennial newness and fruitfulness by the presence of Christian couples and families who dedicate at least a part of their lives to working in mission territories, proclaiming the Gospel and doing service to their fellowmen in the love of Jesus Christ” (FC 54).

The Christian family must be also a “domestic church”, a place of sanctification which originates from the sacrament of matrimony and from the presence of Christ in the life of the couple (see LG 48). The spouses are called upon to be holy in the fidelity to their conjugal love. In this connection the following words from FC, no. 56, are to be brought to mind: “Christian spouses and parents...[Christian marriage] is in itself a liturgical action glorifying God in Jesus Christ and in the Church. By celebrating it, Christian spouses profess their gratitude to God for the sublime gift bestowed on them of being able to live in their married and family lives the very love of God for people and the love of the Lord Jesus for the Church, his bride.”

Precisely because in the center of Christian marriage there is a God-given love that becomes human love, the Eucharist is the very source of matrimony (FC 57). FC says that “in this sacrifice of the New and Eternal Covenant that Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage originates, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed” (FC 57).

Moreover, the Christian family is a community at the service of man (FC 63), by acting out the commandment of charity as acceptance, respect and service to everyone. And this, in first place, within the domestic community, then “in the wider circle of the ecclesial community of which the Christian family is a part. Thanks to love within the family, the Church can and ought to take on a more homelike or family dimension, developing a more human and fraternal style of relationship... In each individual, especially in the poor, the weak and those who suffer or are unjustly treated, love knows how to discover the face of Christ, and discover a fellow human being to be loved and served” (FC 64).

Therefore, as it appears in FC, marriage and Christian family are ordained by themselves towards a prophetic, priestly and kingly service of the Church and the world, beginning from the domestic dimension without becoming closed in it and following the divine vocation through the discernment of the Church.

Some families can open themselves to this kind of service only in a limited way (because for instance of the presence of sick people in the home, of financial difficulties or other personal constraints, etc.). Other families, instead, have amazing capabilities of acceptance, service and availability to the mission of the Church. All of this must be considered within the ambience of God’s providence over the world and the Church. He it is who distributes gifts and charisms, who facilitates or makes things harder, who has one way of calling or another. Just like the Lord may call some couples to the task of evangelizing families, one of the spouses to ecclesial ministry or to a deacon’s service, some of the children to a monastic or hermitic life; so also he may call a husband to the priestly ministry and the wife and the family to participate in it.

Such theological outlooks on marriage and the family are already a Catholic heritage. They did not originate nor were they developed in relation to the question of a contemporary married priesthood, just because they were developed in the Western lung of the Catholic church. However, we

must say that they greatly illustrate the practice of the Eastern lung because they help manifest its deep significance in relation to the economy of salvation.

The passing from marriage to the sacrament of orders can be seen as a process of growth and making explicit. Marriage and family life are not in contradiction to priestly ministry of the husband in uniduality with his wife; on the contrary, *they find in it a way (not the only one) to express fully their family ministry in the Church.*

According to this point of view we may state that the married priest – namely a man called to accept/live his priesthood *in* marriage – receives a call on the part of the Lord that includes within its horizon his marriage and his family, particularly his wife and in some way his children too. It is therefore a call which *since its very beginning in God’s will* is in continuity with the sacramental meaning of the matrimony, namely to be a sign and participation of the love of God and his Church. Perhaps at this point we are given to

- 9 Cf. BENEDICT XVI: *Address to the Participants in the International Convention on the Theme “Woman and Man, the Humanum in its Entirety”*, Sala Clementina, 9 February 2008, retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080209_donna-uomo.html; accessed 21.09.2014: “In *Mulieris Dignitatem* [1988], John Paul II wished to deepen the fundamental anthropological truths of man and woman, the equality of their dignity and the unity of both, the well-rooted and profound diversity between the masculine and the feminine and their vocation to reciprocity and complementarity, to collaboration and to communion (cf. n. 6). This ‘uniduality’ of man and woman is based on the foundation of the dignity of every person created in the image and likeness of God, who ‘male and female he created them’ (Gn 1: 27), avoiding an indistinct uniformity and a dull and impoverishing equality as much as irreconcilable and conflictual difference (cf. JOHN PAUL II: *Letter to Women*, 8). This dual unity brings with it, inscribed in body and soul, the relationship with the other, love for the other, interpersonal communion that implies ‘that the creation of man is also marked by a certain likeness to the divine communion’ (*Mulieris dignitatem*, n.7).”
- 10 JOHN PAUL II: *Familiaris consortio*, 22 November 1981, retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.htm; accessed 21.09.2014.
- 11 BENEDICT XVI: *Address to the Participants in the International Convention on the theme “Woman and Man”*.

perceive what, in my opinion, may be called the theological significance of the married priesthood, namely the meaning whereby the married priest – *precisely because he is married* – has a direct relation to the mystery of salvation in Christ.

The spouse who is called to the priesthood, by way of his conjugal call (that is, following the path of his conjugal call), by becoming a priest with the consent/sharing of his wife (and children), fulfills concretely and historically *a true image of the ecclesial meaning/ministry of the very conjugal vocation*. The conjugal vocation is in fact a call to build the Church through the “*uniduality*” and to widen its boundaries.

The husband, by becoming a priest is called – within the uniduality, hence in sharing with his wife – to love more, not less, to widen his capacity to love.

The boundaries of his family are widened, he acquires sons and daughters, his paternity is widened; his family becomes the community, and the community becomes his family. In this case, what the *Message of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (October 18, 2014) says becomes particularly true: “The family is thus an authentic domestic Church that expands to become the family of families which is the ecclesial community. Christian spouses are called to become teachers of faith and of love for young couples as well.”¹²

The love that binds the husband to his wife and his wife to him in the uniduality, a love that, by virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, is in both participation of the very spousal love (charity) of Christ, acquires a still deeper strength and can become in ministry a love “to the end”.

These last words, which are a clear reference to John 13,1, are not quoted off-handedly. I take them from Pope John Paul II, from his letter to the Christian families of 1994, *Gratissimam sane*, where the Pope comments Ephesians 5,32:

The Church cannot be understood as the mystical body of Christ, as the sign of man’s covenant with God in Christ, or as the universal sacrament of salvation, unless we keep in mind the ‘great

mystery’ involved in the creation of man as male and female and the vocation of both to conjugal love, to fatherhood and motherhood. The ‘great mystery’ that is the Church and humanity in Christ does not exist apart from the ‘great mystery’ expressed in ‘one flesh,’ that is, in the reality of marriage and family. The family itself is the great mystery of God. As the ‘domestic church,’ it is the bride of Christ. The universal Church, and every particular Church in her, is most immediately revealed as the bride of Christ in the domestic church, and in its experience of love: conjugal love, paternal and maternal love, fraternal love, the love of a community of persons and of generations. Could we ever imagine human love without the Bridegroom and the love with which He first loved ‘to the end’? Only if husbands and wives share in that love and in that great mystery can they love ‘to the end.’ Unless they share in it, they do not know ‘to the end’ what love truly is and how radical are its demands.¹³

John Paul II says here forcefully what we have tried somehow to state previously, the theological meaning of married clergy which perhaps agrees most appropriately with the two-thousand year old practice of the Church: to become, by its conjugal and priestly existence, the living image of the deep unity of the “great mystery”, both as domestic church as well as community church. “There is no ‘great mystery’, which is the Church and the humanity of Christ, without ‘the great mystery’ expressed in the ‘one flesh’ (Gen 2:24; Eph 5:31-32), that exists in the reality of marriage and the family.”¹⁴ Such are the words of Pope John Paul II. According to his words, the one is the symbol of the other, one manifests the other. Thus, married priesthood, because of the “personal” coinciding of the two “great mysteries”, manifests that the two are in reality symbol one of the other; they are the only church that is manifested in two homologous and concentric forms.

The conjugal love of the one *who is ordained as a priest in the uniduality* is called to be the living image of that love of the Bridegroom who gives his life for his church, a special and adequate realization of that Christic love “to the

end” to which every Christian is called since the moment he is taken from the baptismal font.

4. Conclusion

The married condition of Eastern priests (there are also some western married priests) is a reality with full right of existence in the Catholic Church; it has its own theological meaning, which is neither superior nor inferior to ecclesiastical celibacy. It is simply different, but altogether in harmony and compatible with it.

The married clergy, by its very existence, manifests the full ecclesial vocation of every Christian marriage and the deep unity of the manifestations of the “great mystery”. This is my basic conclusion. But let me add only two words.

The first one is that maybe it is the right moment to give birth in the Church to a real *catholic* theology of priesthood, a theology able to include also the married priesthood, a *lawful (legitima)* (PO 16) tradition of the catholic of the Church and a state always considered as based upon a divine call. Up to now the catholic theology of priesthood has been a theology for celibate priests, without a real place for married priests.

The second and last word is a quotation from my contribution to *Close to Our Hearts*: the historical existence of a married clergy in the Church is full evidence that “conjugal existence is com-

pletely compatible with the total gift of self to the Church, and that it does not *essentially* compete in any way with total love for the Church or with service of the Church”.¹⁵

12 *Message of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 18 October 2014, retrieved from <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/18/0768/03043.html>; accessed 30.10.2014.

13 JOHN PAUL II: *Gratissimam sane*, 19.

14 *Ibid.*

15 A. BRENNINKMEIJER-WERHAHN/K. DEMMER (eds.): *Close to our Hearts: Personal Reflections on Marriage*, Zürich-Berlin: LIT, 2013, 185.



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• Summary

The Theological and Ecclesial Meaning of Married Priesthood: Some Reflections

The author first shows how much the documents of the Church after the Council have put aside the teaching of the Second Vatican Council about married clergy. He then refers to the practice of the Eastern Churches, both orthodox and catholic, and highlights that in the Eastern view the presence of married clergy does not arise out of a practical necessity but rather by

a truly divine vocation to priesthood: the Lord himself calls a married man to priesthood and this vocation is confirmed by the judgment of the Church. As generated by a divine vocation, the presence of married clergy has its own theological meaning in the Church and cannot be reduced to a purely canonical discipline. The final part of the paper is devoted to showing that the

theological and ecclesial meaning of married clergy has now become much more understandable than in the past, since the theology of the family developed in recent decades manifests clearly the close harmony existing between the theological/ecclesial sense of marital/family ministry and the call of a married man to the priestly ordination.