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 BY CATHY CARIDI

Celibacy and the Priesthood

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Q: If Catholic priests have to embrace celibacy, how is it possible for married converts from the Episcopal church to be ordained Catholic priests? This doesn't make any sense to me. –Phil

A: Phil is referencing the Apostolic Constitution signed by Pope Benedict in November 2009, providing norms designed for the large numbers of former Anglicans (who in the US are generally known as Episcopalians) wishing to enter the Catholic Church. But before we take a look at what that document says, perhaps it would be best to examine first what the Church says in general about priestly celibacy, and why.

Nearly 45 years ago, the Second Vatican Council issued a decree on the ministry and life of priests. [Presbyterorum Ordinis](#) reaffirmed the Catholic Church's age-old position that celibacy—that is, abstaining from marriage—is especially suitable for the clergy.

Through... celibacy observed for the Kingdom of Heaven, priests are consecrated to Christ by a new and exceptional reason. They adhere to him more easily with an undivided heart, they dedicate themselves more freely in him and through him to the service of God and men, and they more expeditiously minister to his Kingdom and the work of heavenly regeneration, and thus they are apt to accept, in a broad sense, paternity in Christ. In this way they profess themselves before men as willing to be dedicated to the office committed to them... [\(16\)](#)

As we have seen countless times before in this space, canon law follows theology. Thus it should surprise no one that [canon 277.1](#), which is worded in a very theological way, echoes the same sentiments: Clerics are bound to observe perfect and perpetual continence [i.e., refraining from sexual relations] for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, and are thus bound to celibacy. It notes further that celibacy is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can more easily remain close to Christ with an undivided heart, and can dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and neighbor.

Clearly, therefore, priests are not permitted to marry. In fact, it is impossible for an ordained priest to marry validly in the Catholic Church: [canon 1087](#) states unequivocally that those in sacred orders invalidly attempt marriage. The only way that a man who has already been ordained a priest can get married in the eyes of the Church is for him to have been previously returned to the lay state (which was discussed in greater detail in [“Can a](#)

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Got it!

But if a priest cannot marry, does it logically follow that a married man cannot be ordained a priest? Well, [canon 1042 n. 1](#) would suggest that this is indeed the case, because it states that a man who has a wife is impeded from ordination to the priesthood. The wording of this canon indicates that a widower, who was indeed married but no longer has a wife, can be ordained a Catholic priest; but so long as the wife is still living, ordination of the husband is not possible. It would seem that the issue is thus closed and there is nothing further to be said.

There is, however, more to the story.

As we saw back in “[Are There Any Limitations on the Power of the Pope?](#)” there are basically two sources for the laws contained in the Code of Canon Law. Some are held to be divine laws, given to us by Christ Himself, and thus they can never be changed. Others, however, are termed “merely ecclesiastical laws,” since they were established by human authority. As such these can be changed by human authority as well—or else, rather than completely changing a law that is of purely human origin, church authorities can grant a dispensation from following it in an individual case. The whole concept of dispensation was discussed in detail back in “[Marriage Between a Catholic and a Non-Catholic](#).” An excellent, concrete example of this just arose recently in “[Can Cousins Marry in the Church?](#)” where we saw that the law which bars first cousins from marrying in the Church can be dispensed by the diocesan bishop. The canon preventing first cousins from getting married is not held to be a divine law, so exceptions can be made and such marriages can validly take place with the appropriate advance approval.

So to get back to the question at hand, can a married man receive a dispensation and be validly ordained a Catholic priest? The answer is yes.

We know that initially, married men were indeed permitted to become priests in the early centuries of the Church. In fact, to this day, some of the eastern-rite Catholic Churches, such as the Maronites, ordain married men on a regular basis. (See “[Are They Really Catholic? Part I](#)” for a more ample discussion of these culturally non-Western but definitely Catholic Churches.) We cannot deduce from the historical evidence that the obligation to be celibate is of divine law—many of those ordained by the Apostles themselves, in the years immediately following Christ’s resurrection and ascension into Heaven, were evidently married men! We can only conclude that the ban on ordaining married men to the priesthood is of human, rather than divine origin.

It follows logically that it is possible for married men to receive a dispensation and to be ordained as Catholic priests. But the next question we have to ask is, are there ever situations when that is a good idea?

We know that under the late Pope John Paul II, there were numerous cases of Episcopalian clergy who were received into the Catholic Church. Many of them had wives and families, since Episcopalian clerics are permitted to marry. When they became Catholics, they frequently asked to become Catholic priests as well (after some Catholic seminary training, of course). John Paul frequently permitted these married men to be ordained as Catholic priests. They were thus dispensed from the canon that forbids this.

This brings us to the heart of Phil’s question. More recently, in light of the large numbers of American Episcopalians and British Anglicans who wish to become Catholics, the Vatican determined that some procedure

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Thus the Apostolic Constitution [Anglicanorum Coetibus](#) was issued by Pope Benedict on November 4th of last year. Its purpose was to provide a consistent system to be followed when these groups of Episcopalians/Anglicans sought reception into the Catholic Church. While much of this document is straightforward (and outside the scope of this column), one part received quite a lot of attention.

[Section VI.2](#) addresses the issue of those clergymen who wish to be ordained as Catholic priests after becoming Catholics. It notes that the diocesan bishops who receive these new Catholics are, as a rule, allowed only to ordain those men who are celibate, in accord with canon 277.1. However, it adds that the bishop can petition the Pope to admit already married men to priestly ordination on a case-by-case basis.

There were a number of stories in the media at that time which suggested that perhaps this was a relaxation of the Church's rules about celibacy and the priesthood. In fact, as we've seen above, it was nothing of the sort! The possibility of permitting married men to be ordained Catholic priests has always existed in the Church, and there were already cases when this was allowed well before *Anglicanorum Coetibus* was ever issued.

The [Complementary Norms](#), a list of practical instructions on implementing the document which was issued on the same day, reaffirm that requests to admit married men to the Catholic priesthood must be approved by the Pope. But they also add some more specific information about dealing with a couple of concrete scenarios. Catholic priests who left the Church to marry, and later became Episcopalian clerics, are not going to be permitted to function as Catholic priests again ([VI.1](#)), although of course they will be welcomed back into the Church as Catholics if they wish. And those Episcopalian clerics who are in "irregular marriage situations" will not be allowed to become Catholic priests either. Presumably this includes divorced and remarried men, men who have married divorced women, or others whose marriages cannot be recognized as valid in the eyes of the Church.

In fact, the rules contained in these two documents about permitting married men to be ordained Catholic priests are actually quite strict. There is no way that one may reasonably construe this as an "opening of the flood-gates" leading to a general acceptance of married priests in the Church. Rather, it is a concession to individual persons who functioned as non-Catholic clerics in the past, and who naturally would like to continue in a comparable function now that they have become Catholics.

One can see how Pope Benedict approaches the whole notion of priestly celibacy from a fascinating exchange during [a question-and-answer session](#), which he held at the Vatican for priests from all over the world just a few months ago. A Slovak priest asked him for guidance in explaining the true meaning of celibacy. Here is part of the Pope's extemporaneous response:

...[C]elibacy... is a definitive "yes," it is allowing ourselves to be taken in hand by God, giving ourselves into the hands of the Lord, into His "I," and therefore it is an act of fidelity and trust, an act that the fidelity of marriage also supposes; ...it is precisely the definitive "yes" that supposes, that confirms the definitive "yes" of marriage.... And if this disappears, the root of our culture will be destroyed.

Readers will probably not be surprised that our Pope has a profound understanding and appreciation of a celibate

sacrifice to God, a concept which developed well over 1000 years ago in the Church—and, according to the Pope, with good reason.

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