

# The Charism of Priestly Celibacy

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL,  
and  
PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

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## Friends of the Bridegroom: The Biblical Foundations of Priestly Celibacy

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**I**s the discipline of priestly celibacy of biblical origin, or did it arise only in Church tradition of the patristic era with its ascetic ideals? If it is of biblical origin, what is its deepest rationale? These questions of immense theological and pastoral importance illustrate in a particularly striking way the interdependence of sacred scripture and sacred tradition. The New Testament teaching on celibacy arose out of the living tradition of the early Church, which was itself rooted in the traditions of Israel. The scriptures are in turn normative for subsequent tradition, yet our understanding of what the scriptures say is deeply conditioned by how the Church has received, interpreted, and lived these texts in its tradition. In the case of priestly celibacy, the question is complicated by the fact that two very different lines of interpretation have developed in the Christian East and

West. Further, in the West the main lines of reasoning for the discipline have changed over time, as the emphasis has shifted from priestly *continence* within marriage (in the early centuries when many clerics were married) to priestly *celibacy*.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the recent studies of the origins of clerical celibacy focus on patristic writings and on ecclesiastical legislation from the fourth century on, with only brief discussion of the biblical material.<sup>2</sup> This lack of attention is not surprising, considering that the relevant biblical texts are few and tend to be oblique and suggestive rather than direct. In this chapter I will explore these biblical foundations by examining first the Old Testament background and then the teaching of the gospels and of Paul on celibacy. I will consider whether the New Testament indicates any intrinsic relationship between celibacy and the priesthood and what the underlying logic would be of such a relationship. Finally, I'll examine two passages that seem to present counterevidence to a biblical basis for clerical celibacy and offer an alternative way of interpreting these texts.

## CELIBACY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

To appreciate the New Testament's teaching on celibacy it is crucial first to recognize that in ancient Israel celibacy as a religious ideal simply did not exist. In Israelite tradition there is no greater human blessing than that of marriage and children. It is the primordial blessing given to humanity at the moment of creation: "God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and multiply" (Gn 1:28). It is likewise the foundational blessing bestowed on Abraham at the origin of the chosen people: "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you" (Gn 17:6).<sup>3</sup> Marriage is thus "a religiously privileged state, privileged by revelation itself."<sup>4</sup> Conversely, to be deprived of the gift of marriage and children was considered the greatest of misfortunes. The esteem in which Israel held marriage is poignantly illustrated in the story of Jephthah's daughter, who was doomed to be offered in sacrifice because of her father's rash vow. She begs his permission to first go into the mountains for two months to "mourn her virginity"

(Jgs 11:37–38)—that is, to mourn the fact that she dies a virgin. In the context of the old covenant, to freely choose celibacy and childlessness as a state of life was simply unthinkable. Priestly celibacy would of course have been nonsensical, since the primary qualification for priesthood was physical descent from the family of Aaron.

Only one instance of voluntary celibacy is recorded in the Old Testament: that of the prophet Jeremiah. But his celibacy had a meaning and motivation entirely different from later Christian practice. God required the prophet to forego marriage, not as a positive commitment to God but as a prophetic sign of imminent disaster (Jer 16:1–4). In typical prophetic style, Jeremiah personally embodied his message. His celibacy was a graphic symbol of the terrifying judgment to come upon apostate Judah, in which women and children would perish by disease, sword, and famine without lament or burial.<sup>5</sup>

The Old Testament's negative view of the unmarried state is widely reflected in later rabbinic writings. According to rabbinic tradition, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gn 1:28) is the first of the 613 commandments that Jewish men are required to observe.<sup>6</sup> For a man to remain unmarried past the age of twenty was considered blameworthy.<sup>7</sup> The Talmud records the well-known saying of Rabbi Eleazar: "Any man who has no wife is no man."<sup>8</sup> Despite this general disapproval, however, in the intertestamental period there were some instances of celibacy as a freely chosen lifestyle. Some members of the Essene community practiced celibacy, although the evidence is inconclusive as to whether it was obligatory or merely encouraged. Clearly, it was linked with ritual purity and with a highly negative view of women.<sup>9</sup> Philo also mentions the example of the Therapeutae, a Jewish sect in Egypt.<sup>10</sup> The closest parallel to Christian celibacy is the intriguing example of the late first-century Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai, who paradoxically disapproved of celibacy yet practiced it himself. When challenged by his fellow rabbis, he replied, "But what shall I do, seeing that my soul is in love with the Torah? The world can be carried on by others."<sup>11</sup> All these instances, however, were exceptions to the Jewish norm, in

which the failure to take a wife and bear offspring was frowned on as a transgression of a divine command.

With respect to *temporary* sexual abstinence, however, we find an entirely different situation. At several points the Old Testament bears witness to a close relationship between sexual abstinence and contact with the holy. This link first appears in the Exodus account of the theophany on Mount Sinai, the event that gave birth to Israel as a nation. Here God establishes a priestly status for all Israel: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6). He then commands that in preparation for the theophany on the third day the people "consecrate themselves" and "wash their garments" (19:10)—actions closely linked with priesthood (cf. Ex 40:13; Nm 19:7). To these injunctions Moses adds, "Be ready by the third day; do not go near a woman" (19:15), that is, abstain from marital relations. Although the reasoning is left implicit, the notion that a direct encounter with God requires abstinence may reflect the idea that sexual intercourse causes a certain preoccupation with what is earthly, a diverting of energies that precludes fixing one's undivided attention and ardor on the holy God. It is significant that in the Pentateuchal narrative this stipulation is given *prior* to the ritual purity laws of Leviticus. At this point in Exodus there is no suggestion of sexual relations causing impurity; it is a matter of passing not from the unclean to the clean but from the profane (common) realm to the holy. Only *after* the watershed event of the golden calf idolatry with its (probably cultic) sexual revelry (cf. Ex 32:6, 25)—a particularly egregious abuse of the sexual faculty—is the ritual purity legislation instituted specifying that intercourse renders one unclean. This suggests that the abstinence rule expressed here embodies an enduring principle that does not belong to those ritual purity laws abrogated in the new covenant.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, later rabbinic commentary, despite its negative view of celibacy, held that, from the Sinai theophany on, Moses remained permanently continent. His abiding proximity to God (in contrast to Israel's temporary proximity) was viewed

as requiring the permanent renunciation of sexual relations. According to the Talmud, Moses reasoned to himself,

If the Israelites, with whom the *Shekhinah* [the divine presence] spoke only on one occasion and He appointed them a [definite] time, yet the Torah said, "Be ready for the third day: do not come near a woman": I, with whom the *Shekhinah* speaks at all times and does not appoint me a [definite] time, how much more so!<sup>13</sup>

The link between sexual abstinence and proximity to God is codified in Leviticus, though now with an explicit reference to ritual purity.<sup>14</sup> Since sexual intercourse rendered a person temporarily unclean (Lv 15:18, 32; cf. Dt 23:10–14), priests were required to observe abstinence during their terms of temple service—a requirement mentioned explicitly in regard to the eating of sacrificed food (Lv 22:4–7). Abstinence was also required of soldiers on active duty, engaged in the sacred duty of fighting the Lord's battles (cf. 1 Sm 21:4–5).<sup>15</sup>

Although this Old Testament background is rarely invoked today in discussions of the theology of celibacy, it is the essential backdrop to New Testament teaching for two reasons. First, scripture's unambiguous affirmation of the good of marriage helps ensure that Christian celibacy is not founded on a denigration of the married state or on a view of sexuality as intrinsically tainted—a mistake too often made in early Christianity. Second, the Old Testament regulations on temporary sexual abstinence provide an important though subtle clue to the link between celibacy and ordained ministry in the New Testament.

## CELIBACY IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS

At the dawn of the new covenant, in the angel Gabriel's dialogue with Mary, is the announcement of something entirely new: a fruitful virginity. Gabriel assures Mary that, although she does "not know man" (Lk 1:34), by the power of the Holy Spirit she will bring forth a child who is the Son of God—a fruitfulness that infinitely surpasses anything envisioned in

the old covenant. Since Luke portrays Mary as an icon of the Christian community,<sup>16</sup> Mary's virginity is the first hint of a new, supernatural kind of espousal and fruitfulness for the Church, although during Jesus' earthly life this mystery remained hidden from his contemporaries. Luke's account of the annunciation and visitation also portrays Mary as the new ark of the covenant—the true dwelling place of the living God, of which the original ark was only a foreshadowing.<sup>17</sup> Joseph, then, is in the role of priest, chastely ministering to God's hidden presence in the humble home at Nazareth.

The only direct reference to celibacy in Jesus' public ministry is a remarkably brief saying recorded in Matthew—significantly, in the context of an affirmation of marriage. When Jesus declares that marriage is indissoluble, the disciples protest, "If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (Mt 19:10). This complaint becomes the occasion for a new pronouncement on the voluntary renunciation of marriage (for an entirely different reason than the defeatist pragmatism of the disciples):

Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it. (Mt 19:11–12)

This saying, which may sound harsh to us, would have been even more so in the cultural context of the day. The term "eunuch" had highly pejorative, even offensive, connotations.<sup>18</sup> As a man with a physical defect, a eunuch was ineligible for priesthood and barred from any participation in the temple worship of God's people (Lv 21:20–21; Dt 23:1).<sup>19</sup> It is even possible that "eunuch" was a term of opprobrium that Jesus' opponents had thrown at him because of his unmarried state, which he picked up and used for his own purposes, as he did with other epithets such as glutton, drunkard, blasphemer, friend of tax collectors, and sinners.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus' saying is framed by a double affirmation that what he proposes applies not to all his followers but only to some: "Those to whom it is given" (Mt 19:11a) or one "who is able to receive this" (v. 12b). That is, celibacy for the kingdom is a charism, a gift freely given by God to whomever he wills, which must in turn be freely accepted by the individual. In a characteristically Semitic way, Jesus sets the context for his saying by noting the obvious fact of life that some men are eunuchs by genetic defect and some by castration. This negative context serves to underscore the daring newness of his pronouncement: "There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."<sup>21</sup> As Pope John Paul II points out in his theology of the body catecheses, in the context of salvation history Jesus' saying is an "absolute novelty," a "turning point" in the revelation of the meaning of the body.<sup>22</sup>

By using the severe term "eunuch" as a metaphor for voluntary celibacy, Jesus alludes to the self-denial entailed in such a call, that it involves the renunciation of the primordial blessing and the ordinary path to happiness in human life. Yet, he asserts, there is a supreme value, a supernatural good, that relativizes all natural goods and thus motivates such renunciation, namely, "the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven—Matthew's circumlocution for "the kingdom of God," an expression that sums up Israel's hopes for the manifest reign of God over his people and all creation<sup>23</sup>—is the central object of all Jesus' preaching and public ministry. The kingdom is already present in Jesus himself and the community formed around him yet mysteriously hidden and to come in its fullness only at the end of time. That some would renounce marriage "for the sake of the kingdom" is a prophetic testimony to the reality of the kingdom, already present here and now.<sup>24</sup> Even more, it is an eschatological sign pointing to the full consummation of the kingdom. In his later dialogue with the Sadducees, Jesus declares that "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mt 22:30). Those who are celibate for the kingdom, then, anticipate in a visible way this final destiny of human life. They "step beyond

the dimensions of history—while still living within the dimensions of history—and dramatically declare to the world that *the kingdom of God is here* (Mt 12:28).<sup>25</sup>

In his profound reflection on these texts, John Paul II writes that Jesus' words imply that, in the resurrected life, the spousal meaning of the body—that is, its sexual complementarity designed for spousal union—will be revealed “as the ‘virginal’ meaning of being male and female.”<sup>26</sup> Marriage will come to an end only because it will give way to that which it is designed to prefigure: the heavenly wedding—an immeasurably greater exchange of love in which each person will “express all the energies of his own personal and . . . psychosomatic subjectivity.”<sup>27</sup> Each person's gift of self to God will be his or her eternal response to the living experience of “*God's most personal 'self-giving': in his very divinity to man.*”<sup>28</sup> The risen human body will become the vehicle and expression of a reciprocal self-donation to God, and to all the redeemed, that will be virginal yet will infinitely transcend the earthly one-flesh union of husband and wife. Celibates, by witnessing to the fulfillment found in self-donation apart from sexual intimacy, are signs of the joy of the future kingdom already anticipated here on earth.

But there is a further significance to Jesus' saying on eunuchs. The fact that he is offering not only an invitation for his disciples but also the explanation of his own virginity implies that celibacy for the kingdom is ultimately rooted in the mystery of Christ himself. It takes on its full significance only in relation to him. Why was Jesus celibate? This question must be answered in light of his affirmation of his identity elsewhere in the Gospel. In Matthew 9:15, in response to a question about why his disciples do not fast, Jesus replies, “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.” With this saying he alludes to the Old Testament theme of the spousal covenant between YHWH and Israel,<sup>29</sup> and in a veiled way identifies *himself* as the God who desires to wed his people. As John Paul II notes, the nuptial theme is not just one among many strands of imagery in scripture; rather, it is

the Bible's deepest symbolic key for expressing the relationship between God and man. “As God's salvific plan for humanity, that [spousal] mystery is in some sense the central theme of the whole of revelation, its central reality.”<sup>30</sup> The spousal theme runs through the whole of biblical revelation, from the nuptial scene in the garden at the dawn of creation (Gn 2:21–25), through the Song of Songs, which both Jewish and Christian tradition consider a mystical allegory of the romance between God and his people, and to the “marriage of the Lamb” at the end (Rv 19:7; 21:9).

Jesus further discloses this mystery through the parables of the ten virgins and of the king who gives a wedding banquet for his son (Mt 22:1–14; 25:1–13), which portray his coming as the joyous announcement of the Messianic nuptials so long promised by the prophets. The same imagery is at work in the story of the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1–11). By providing a superabundance of new wine,<sup>31</sup> Jesus manifests himself as the Messianic bridegroom who has come to fulfill God's promises and establish a new, everlasting covenant of marriage with his people. Mary appears as the symbol and personification of the bride. Her response, “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5), echoes the acclamation of the people at Sinai, exemplifying the perfect response to God's covenant love (cf. Ex 19:8; 24:3, 7).<sup>32</sup> The entire Cana event, which takes place “on the third day” (Jn 2:1), is structured as a symbolic foreshadowing of Christ's passion, the definitive consummation of the nuptial covenant.<sup>33</sup> Jesus was celibate, then, precisely *because he is the divine bridegroom*, the Incarnate Son who embodies God's ineffable, undivided, faithful, and eternal love for his people. His identity and mission would be completely incompatible with marriage to a human individual. Far from being a refusal to marry, his celibacy is intrinsically nuptial.

This spousal character of Jesus' celibacy is concretely manifested in his public ministry. His unmarried state, far from distancing him from human relationships, enabled him to draw close to every person.<sup>34</sup> Precisely because he had no human family, he was free to be available to all and to belong to all—to

enjoy their company at table, to heal their diseases, to welcome and show affection to children, and to reveal the Father's unfathomable love for each person he encountered. As bridegroom, Jesus also becomes the founder of the new Messianic family: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt 12:50; cf. Jn 19:26).

Jesus' identity as bridegroom is, then, the deepest rationale of celibacy for the kingdom. This means that, for his disciples, the celibate vocation cannot be grounded in a primarily practical motive—a calculation of advantages in time, energy, and availability for mission.<sup>35</sup> Those who are drawn to accept Jesus' call are drawn primarily not to his cause but to *him*. Their hearts are captivated by the divine bridegroom such that their whole identity is founded in him (cf. Phil 3:12). Having experienced the presence of the kingdom in him, they desire to devote themselves wholly to him, to embody and share in a particular way his spousal self-donation to God's people.<sup>36</sup>

The Gospel of John expresses this desire with particular clarity in the words of John the Baptist, who almost certainly was celibate himself and thus anticipated the celibacy for the kingdom: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:29–30). Significantly, John, the archetype of the celibate ascetic, sacrificed his life to defend the sanctity of marriage (Mt 14:3–11). John's celibate life, devoted to announcing the bridegroom Messiah, is a prototype of Christian celibacy. There is only one bridegroom, but those who are celibate for the kingdom are friends of the bridegroom, who help prepare the Messianic wedding.<sup>37</sup> Like John, they draw attention not to themselves but to him (cf. 2 Cor 4:5). By the witness of their lives they cry out, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him" (Mt 25:6; cf. Rv 22:17). It is not coincidental that the other well-known celibate of the New Testament, Paul, describes his ministry in a similar way, writing to the Corinthians, "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband" (2

Cor 11:2). Paul too is a friend of bridegroom, whose apostolic vocation entails both imaging Christ's "jealous" spousal love and helping the Church-bride to fully reciprocate that love.

## CELIBACY IN THE TEACHING OF PAUL

Paul's instructions concerning marriage and celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7 could be considered a practical application of the teaching and example of Christ, based on his own pastoral experience in the early churches.<sup>38</sup> Paul, like Jesus, makes clear that, although he recommends celibacy, both marriage and celibacy are charisms, that is, gifts of grace that spring entirely from God's initiative and the individual's free acceptance. "I wish that all were as I myself am [i.e., celibate]. But each has his own charism [charisma] from God, one of one kind and one of another" (1 Cor 7:7). It would be a drastic misinterpretation to hold that Paul's advice stems from a denigration of marriage. In fact, his affirmation of the charism of celibacy *elevates* marriage by guaranteeing that marriage too is a freely embraced vocation and not a default position. For Paul, charisms are distinct from natural gifts or aptitudes in that they are permanently dependent on the working of the Holy Spirit. To live the charism of either marriage or celibacy requires an unceasing reliance on the Spirit's power.

Paul bases his exhortation to celibacy on a twofold motive that parallels the teaching of Christ.<sup>39</sup> First there is an eschatological motive. Because "the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31), even those who have wives should "live as though they had none" (1 Cor 7:29). As good and holy as marriage is, it is relativized by the supreme value of the kingdom (cf. Lk 14:26). Celibates, because they are free of the this-worldly cares and anxieties attendant on married life, are able to fix their gaze on the world that is to come. Their lives are a prophetic sign to their fellow Christians that "our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior" (Phil 3:20). The celibate vocation is, then,

the visible symbol of Christ's lordship over time. In the [celibate or] consecrated virgin the Church proclaims that time is . . . bathed already in the glory of the resurrection and the dawn of the parousia. The [celibate or] virgin is the witness to this divine fact, much like the snowcapped peak that catches the first light of the sunrise and heralds the day to a sleeping world.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, the fact that even married Christians are called to live as if they were unmarried (1 Cor 7:29) suggests that Paul does not view celibacy as radically distinguishing one class from others within the Church. Rather, the advent of the kingdom leads all Christians to practice sexual self-restraint in one mode or another.<sup>41</sup> The dominance of the sex drive has been deposed in the face of an immeasurably greater love "hidden beneath the surface of all smaller loves."<sup>42</sup>

Second, the celibate vocation has an apostolic dimension, allowing people freedom to devote themselves entirely to the spread of the kingdom. "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, and his interests are divided" (1 Cor 7:32–34). As with Christ's teaching, it would be a mistake to interpret this in a utilitarian manner.<sup>43</sup> The motive of this commitment is primarily the desire "to please the Lord"—that is, to live a deep friendship with Christ the bridegroom Messiah<sup>44</sup>—and only secondarily the greater freedom and flexibility for his service.

## CELIBACY AND THE PRIESTHOOD

But what does the institution of celibacy have to do with the priesthood? Is Jesus' saying simply a general invitation to his followers, or is it in any way intrinsically linked with apostleship and thus with ordained ministry in the church?

It is noteworthy that Jesus' institution of celibacy for the kingdom takes place in the context of his itinerant preaching, a missionary lifestyle of poverty, and total dependence on God. The apostles are called to share in this lifestyle, giving up the comforts of home and family to devote themselves full-time

to the spread of the kingdom (cf. Mt 10:5–25). Peter implicitly seeks acknowledgment of this sacrifice when he says, "See, we have left our homes and followed you." Jesus' response, in Luke's version, includes "wife" in those things that are given up: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life" (Lk 18:28–30; cf. 14:26).<sup>45</sup> What this meant in the case of Peter, who was or had been married (cf. Lk 4:38), is not specified. But clearly, the giving up of a wife (and children) "for the sake of the kingdom," parallel to becoming a eunuch "for the sake of the kingdom," is a cost that may be imposed by the demands of apostolic ministry.

There is evidence in the gospels that the apostles were viewed as exercising not only an evangelistic and missionary role but also in some sense a *priestly* one. The New Testament, of course, nowhere uses the term "priest" (*hiereus*) or high priest (*archiereus*) for ministers of the new covenant—understandably so, since in first-century Judaism "priest" denoted a descendant of Aaron who offered animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple.<sup>46</sup> There are, however, subtle indications that Christ intended the Twelve to serve as a new priestly leadership for a new Israel. Although space does not permit us to consider these in detail, a few indications will suffice.<sup>47</sup>

Mark 3:14 tells us that Jesus "appointed" (*epoiēsen*) the Twelve in a solemn manner to share in his redemptive ministry. The Greek word is literally "made" or "created"—a verb often used in the Septuagint for conferring a sacred office (cf. Ex 18:25; 1 Sm 12:6).<sup>48</sup> At the last supper, Jesus institutes and commands his apostles to repeat what would have been recognized as a priestly act—the offering of sacrificial bread and wine, now become his body and blood. In preparation for this, he washes their feet—a gesture that recalls the ceremonial washing that was part of the old covenant rite of priestly ordination (Ex 29:4; Lv 8:6). At Peter's objection Jesus responds, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" (Jn 13:8)—echoing an Old Testament formula used of the Levites, who have no "share" in



the land because the Lord alone is their inheritance (Nm 18:20; Dt 10:9; 18:1–2).<sup>49</sup> Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 seems deliberately structured to parallel the priestly rites of the day of atonement in Leviticus 16. Jesus prays that the Father "consecrate" (*hagiazō*) the apostles (Jn 17:17, 19), echoing the words engraved on the gold plate of a high priest's turban, "consecrated to the Lord" (*hagiasma kyriou*, Ex 28:36).

But the most significant text, for our purposes, is in Matthew 12, where Jesus evokes two priestly precedents to justify his disciples' actions. This takes place on the occasion when his disciples are plucking heads of grain as they walk through a grain field on the Sabbath. When the Pharisees object that the disciples are violating Sabbath law, Jesus replies,

Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless? (Mt 12:3–5).

Jesus is recalling an episode in 1 Samuel, where David and his companions, fleeing for their lives from King Saul, seek help from Ahimelech, the priest on duty at the Lord's tabernacle. Ahimelech has nothing on hand but the "holy bread," the bread of the presence that was offered to the Lord every Sabbath and that priests alone could eat (Ex 25:30; Lv 24:5–9). But he offers David the bread on one condition: that he and his men have maintained sexual abstinence (1 Sm 21:4; cf. Lv 22:4–7). Only in this state of ritual purity would they be qualified for the proximity to God entailed by the priestly act of eating the holy bread. When David responds in the affirmative, Ahimelech consents. As Crispin Fletcher-Louis notes, "The way Jesus tells the Old Testament story, David plays the role of the priest who enters the sanctuary on the Sabbath to collect the old bread and distribute it to his fellow priests."<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Jesus' retelling places *himself* in the role of David and his disciples in the role of David's

men who are granted a priestly privilege because they are on a sacred mission.

The second example Jesus invokes, not coincidentally, also involves the priesthood and the holy bread. The priests in the temple, he says, "profane the Sabbath" (Mt 12:5), so to speak, by doing the "work" of offering the bread of the presence as well as the other Sabbath sacrifices (cf. Nm 28:9–10). Yet they are "guiltless," precisely because they are carrying out the priestly duty of ministering to the Lord. Jesus suggests that just such a priestly exemption applies to his apostles, carrying out the priestly ministry of the new covenant. As the last supper account will make clear (Mt 26:26–28), they too will offer the "bread of the presence"—the bread that is no longer merely a symbol but the living presence of the Lord.

Although Jesus makes no direct reference to celibacy in Matthew 12, the priestly requirement of sexual abstinence is part of the contextual resonance of the passages he cites. When read together with his invitation to celibacy for the kingdom in Matthew 19, there is at least a suggestion that the apostles' ministry calls for the sexual continence that allows the absolute, undivided attention to the living God that was required of Israel at Sinai and priests on duty in the old covenant, now transposed to the Church where such priestly ministry is permanent rather than temporary. This does not mean, however, that the Twelve are in any sense envisioned as a reincarnation of the Levitical priesthood. Their ministry is not priestly in its own right but by participation in that of Jesus, the "great high priest" (Heb 4:14) who alone offers the sacrificial gift of himself that establishes the new covenant (Heb 9:15; 10:14).

## CELIBACY AND PRIESTHOOD IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL

Turning to the letters of Paul, we find that the apostle also uses terminology that suggests an awareness of his apostleship as a priestly ministry—though again, one transposed to a completely different level than that of the Levitical priests.

In Romans Paul describes himself as a “minister [*leitourgos*] of Christ Jesus to the gentiles performing the priestly service [*hierourgounta*] of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:16). As Albert Cardinal Vanhoye points out, these are cultic terms that establish a close analogy between apostolic ministry and sacrificial worship.<sup>51</sup> Paul is envisioning himself as a celebrant who, through his work of evangelization, offers to God the holy lives of the gentiles who have come to faith in Christ and are sanctified by the fire of the Holy Spirit.<sup>52</sup> In 1 Corinthians, Paul even more explicitly compares his ministry to that of the Levitical priests: “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the offerings of the altar? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor 9:13–14).<sup>53</sup> Although Paul is not speaking directly of the sacraments in these texts, the “offering of the gentiles” is intrinsically connected to them. It is precisely through baptism and the Eucharist that Christians become the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 10:16–17; 12:12–13), able to “present [their] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1).<sup>54</sup>

Paul views his celibacy—the renunciation of a legitimate good (1 Cor 9:5)—as stemming from his all-consuming commitment to his apostolic vocation (1 Cor 9:1–27). It is in Paul’s desire to “please the Lord” (1 Cor 7:32) that his teaching on celibacy converges with his priestly understanding of his apostleship. As a “minister of Christ Jesus” (Rom 15:16) Paul passionately shares in Christ’s spousal love for his church. As Christ “loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25), so Paul daily gives himself up for those whom he has “begotten” in Christ (1 Cor 4:15; cf. Gal 4:19). Like Jesus, he makes himself available to all and makes the cares of all his own. “Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” (2 Cor 11:28–29). He “yearns” for his converts “with the affection of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:8). He gladly suffers the hardships, fatigue, persecutions and “the daily pressure . . . of anxiety for

all the churches” (2 Cor 11:28), so that he might make Christ’s spousal self-donation visible and present to them in his own flesh. His celibate vocation allows him to image in a vivid way the ardent and exclusive love of Christ. But he does so by continually pointing not to himself but to Christ, whose slave he is (cf. 2 Cor 4:5). Paul is a true friend of the bridegroom, whose whole aim is to present the church “as a pure bride to her one husband” (2 Cor 11:2).

## TWO COUNTERARGUMENTS

Finally, our study would not be complete without considering two texts in the Pauline literature that at first glance seem to present strong counterevidence to the claim that the New Testament church saw a connection between celibacy and ordained ministry. The first is in 1 Corinthians 9, where in the course of defending his and Barnabas’s conduct as apostles, Paul asks the rhetorical question, “Do we not have the right to our food and drink? Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Kephas?” (1 Cor 9:4–5). The question rhetorically expects the answer “yes,” implying that it was considered normal for apostles to be so accompanied. The Greek phrase translated “wife” (*adelphēn gynaike*) is literally “sister wife” or “sister woman.” Most modern commentators interpret this unusual expression to mean a Christian wife,<sup>55</sup> although several Fathers of the Church saw a reference to a Christian unmarried woman.<sup>56</sup> But neither of these interpretations is entirely satisfactory. First, nowhere else in the New Testament is the expression “sister wife” used, even where the context would call for specifying that a wife be a believer (e.g., 1 Cor 7:2); the addition of the word “sister” would seem to be superfluous. Moreover, being accompanied by a wife would, for younger apostles, inevitably mean being accompanied by children as well (and thus being titled to material support from the local churches for them), yet there is no indication that such took place, nor that Paul expected the church to support entire missionary families. The second solution is even more problematic, since a situation in which an unmarried apostle (or,

*a fortiori*, a married one) traveled with an unmarried woman (note that Paul speaks in the singular, not plural)<sup>57</sup> would have given ample occasion for scandal, yet Paul gives no suggestion of any scandal involved.

When this text is considered in the light of patristic usage—too often ignored in biblical exegesis—a different possibility presents itself. In the patristic era, the word “sister” in association with “wife” was the standard way of describing a wife with whom a sacred minister lived in sexual continence after ordination.<sup>58</sup> Although impossible to prove one way or another, it is at least possible that the New Testament church regarded Jesus’ institution of celibacy for the kingdom as setting an ordinary standard of continence for ministers of the new covenant (whether they were single or married), as early church documents claim.<sup>59</sup> If so, then the meaning of Paul’s phrase becomes clear: a “sister wife” is a wife with whom a minister of the gospel now lives in continence, having given up marital relations “for the sake of the kingdom.”<sup>60</sup> Presumably these wives accompanied their husbands both to care for their material needs, like the women who followed Jesus in his public ministry (Mk 15:40–41; Lk 8:2; 23:49, 55), and to share in missionary labor, as in the case of Prisca and Aquila (Acts 18; Rom 16:3), and possibly Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7). This is how Clement of Alexandria, for example, interprets the text: “The apostles . . . took their wives around as Christian sisters rather than spouses, to be their fellow ministers to the women of the household, so that the gospel would reach them without causing scandal.”<sup>61</sup>

The second potential difficulty arises from a phrase used three times in the pastoral letters, “husband of one wife.”<sup>62</sup> This expression appears in the lists of qualifications for each of the groups of ordained ministers—bishops (1 Tm 3:2), presbyters (Ti 1:6), and deacons (1 Tm 3:12)—at a time when church leadership was transitioning from itinerant apostles to stable pastors of local churches. Candidates for these offices must be “the husband of one wife,” that is, not married more than once.<sup>63</sup> At first sight this stipulation seems to undermine any link between celibacy and ordained ministry. But paradoxically, early church

legislation claimed it as evidence for the apostolic origin of clerical continence.<sup>64</sup> To see why this is so, we must first note that this formula is not a general norm for Christians, since elsewhere Paul allows for remarriage after the death of a spouse (1 Cor 7:39) and even encourages it in the case of young widows (1 Tm 5:14). Rather, the norm applies only to ordained ministers and, in converse form, “wife of one husband,” to a special order of widows (1 Tm 5:9). Thus, although we cannot be certain, it may reflect a situation in which ordained ministers were, like enrolled widows, expected to remain continent, and a candidate who had married more than once was regarded as not demonstrating the self-control required for this commitment.<sup>65</sup> This was a common interpretation (though not the only interpretation) of “husband of one wife” for centuries, in both the East and the West.<sup>66</sup> More significantly, as Ignace de la Potterie has pointed out, “husband of one wife” alludes to the spousal covenant between Christ and his Church (2 Cor 11:2), suggesting that sacred ministers are in a unique way called to image that relationship.<sup>67</sup> Those who have married only once in their lifetime show forth more clearly the exclusive love of Christ for his bride the Church.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Most of what scripture says about priestly celibacy is implicit, not explicit. But taken together, the biblical texts form a trajectory that leads seamlessly into the early church’s discipline of continence for ordained ministers,<sup>69</sup> which in the West gradually evolved into the requirement of celibacy for those ordained to the priesthood. Jesus’ institution of celibacy for the kingdom was an innovation in salvation history—a new possibility that can only be understood in the context of the “love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:19) and the superabundant blessings of the kingdom that are now ours. Just as in the case of Christ’s abrogation of the ceremonial laws of Moses, it took time for the full implications of this gospel innovation to unfold in the church. Although at first the reasons put forth for clerical celibacy often focused on the Levitical rules of ritual purity, a

growth in the understanding of biblical revelation has placed the emphasis on a deeper and more adequate foundation: on a priest's special share, as friend of the bridegroom, in the mystery of Christ the divine bridegroom and eternal high priest.

## 3

# The Origins and Practice of Priestly Celibacy in the Early Church

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The emergence and development of the norm of continence and celibacy for the higher clergy in the early Church has a complex history, one that has been studied many times. In what follows, I wish to sketch this history briefly and perhaps to offer, in a modest way, one specific interpretation of that history, particularly in regard to its relation to asceticism and monasticism. As a conclusion, I will offer some basis for a theological reflection on priestly celibacy drawn from the writings of the Fathers of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

A few definitions of terms and axiomatic statements will clarify my approach.

Continence and celibacy are two key terms. Celibacy means being unmarried. Continence is abstinence from sexual relations and can be practiced both by celibates and by married people.