

Vivencio O. Ballano



In Defense of Married Priesthood

A Sociotheological Investigation of
Catholic Clerical Celibacy



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IN DEFENSE OF MARRIED PRIESTHOOD

This book offers an analysis of the sociological, historical, and cultural factors that lie behind mandatory clerical celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church and examines the negative impact of celibacy on the Catholic priesthood in our contemporary age. Drawing on sociological theory and secondary qualitative data, together with Church documents, it contends that married priesthood has always existed in some form in the Catholic Church and that mandatory universal celibacy is the product of cultural and sociological contingencies, rather than sound doctrine. With attention to a range of problems associated with priestly celibacy, including sexual abuse, clerical shortages, loneliness, and spiritual sloth, *In Defense of Married Priesthood* argues that the Roman Catholic Church should permit marriage to the priesthood in order to respond to the challenges of our age. Presenting a sociologically informed alternative to the popular theological perspectives on clerical celibacy, this book defends the notion of the married priesthood as legitimate means of living the vocation of Catholic priesthood—one which is eminently fitting for the contemporary world. It will therefore appeal to scholars and students of religion, theology, and sociology.

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1

INTRODUCTION

A Sociotheological Approach to Catholic Clerical Celibacy and Married Priesthood

Introduction

One of the oldest, lingering, and thorniest issues in the history of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is the mandatory practice of clerical celibacy in Catholic priesthood. Its development remains “one of the central problems of church history and a question of great controversy” (Frassetto 1998, x). Celibacy is also a contentious issue that separates the RCC from the rest of the Christian churches. It remains the most identifiable difference between Protestant churches and the Catholic Church (Plummer 2016). Under the RCC’s Code of Canon Law (Canon 33): “It is decided that marriage be altogether prohibited to bishops, priests, and deacons, or to all clerics placed in the ministry, and that they keep away from their wives and not beget children; whoever does this shall be deprived of the honor of the clerical office.”

“The idea of celibacy—embracing a life that precluded sexual intimacy—had been present in the Church since apostolic times. And yet nearly all the Apostles were married, as were many priests and bishops in the early Church, as Timothy shows” (Doherty 2018, 2). Donald Cozzens (2006) views obligatory clerical celibacy as

a contradiction in terms, because celibacy is a charism, a gift, a grace that resides in the individual often before the person knows it in his heart ... If charismatic celibacy is indeed a jewel in the crown of the priesthood, mandated, obligatory celibacy for individuals not blessed with the charism is a silent martyrdom.

If celibacy becomes obligatory, then priests who have no gift to celibacy would obviously suffer the consequences of living a lonely celibate and asexual life in which they are not called for. As Christ preaches optional celibacy (Matthew 19:11f), only those with this rare gift can humanly live the celibate priesthood. But imposing celibacy on all priests is inappropriate since most of them do not have this rare gift. The persistence of clerical concubinage and illicit clerical unions by clerics in Church history is an indication that celibate priesthood is not for all but only for a few.

The current conversation within the RCC concerning clerical celibacy is generally focused on its ascetical value, equating celibate priesthood to Catholic priesthood. Pope Paul VI considered clerical celibacy as a “precious jewel” for the selfless man who intends to follow Christ in the priesthood (Frazee 1972). However, analyzing critically the biblical and historical evidence indicates that celibacy is indeed a precious jewel, but intended only “to a few,” “not” to “all” (see Matthew 19:11f).

The RCC’s Council of Trent acknowledged that celibacy is not an essential requirement of the priesthood (Vogels 1993). Likewise, the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) conceded that celibacy is not required by the very nature of the priesthood and recognized the married priesthood of the early Church and Eastern Catholic churches. It declared that the RCC intends to maintain both the current practice of celibate and married priesthood, which are legitimately flourishing in the Eastern Churches—implying that married priesthood is indeed a valid social calling and a holy vocation (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* [Order of Priests] 1965, para. 16).

Historically, “official recommendations that priests should avoid marriage only started to appear in the 5th century, but they were more or less ignored until the 12th century when the clamping down on priestly marriage, and the purging of women and priestly offspring from the Church took off with a vengeance” (Mayblin 2018, 5). Mandatory celibacy only became a universal norm after the Second Lateran Council (1139), which was affirmed by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Trent (1563) and preserved up to the present (Owen 2001).¹

Christ envisioned priesthood as having two social callings: celibate priesthood and married priesthood. Biblical and historical evidence points to the legitimacy of married priesthood as currently practiced by Eastern Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant churches (Vogels 1993). As Petra (2015, 19) contends, “If married priesthood is God’s will, that is a divine call, recognized by the Church as such ..., then it is not only a disciplinary decision but an ecclesial decision.” Thus, one wonders, if married priesthood is a valid social calling as envisioned by Christ and practiced by other major Christian churches, and part of an ecclesial decision, why is it not universally recognized by the RCC? Why has the law on obligatory clerical celibacy become the norm despite Christ’s explicit teaching on optional celibacy?

This chapter has three major aims. The first aim is to introduce to the reader the book's objectives, theoretical framework, methodology, and general approach. The second aim is to provide the biblical and doctrinal foundation of married priesthood as a valid social calling of Catholic priesthood as envisioned by Christ in the Scriptures. The third aim is to critically examine critically examines the dominant social constructions of celibate priesthood to justify the mandatory clerical celibacy. Overall, this book theorizes that the biblical, doctrinal, and cultural evidence indicates that there is only one God's gift of the priesthood, but it has two social callings, namely: celibate priesthood and married priesthood.

Defending married priesthood necessarily entails siding with the Protestant argument against Catholic teaching on clerical celibacy. But this is not the case in this book. Its sociotheological investigation only aims to sift the empirical truth from the "constructed" or "naturalized" truth concerning the obligatory clerical celibacy for the good of the Church and greater unity between the RCC and other Christian churches. This is consistent with Christ's teaching on optional celibacy and historical evidence that married priesthood has long been existing in the RCC since the time of the apostles.

This book also hypothesizes that the suppression of married priesthood by the Fourth Lateran Council has resulted in the unpreparedness and more vulnerability for celibate Catholic clergy against serious clerical problems of the current age such as clerical sexual scandal, concubinage, loneliness, spiritual sloth, and priest shortage. Reestablishing it today is imminently fitting to address the challenges of the contemporary world to Catholic priesthood.²

The Book's General Approach

This book is neither purely sociological nor purely theological in approach. It creatively and critically combines both. It attempts to integrate the empirical and the theological in defending the validity of married priesthood as a legitimate social calling of Catholic priesthood. It attempts to pursue the approach of the "sociotheological turn" in contemporary scholarship that encourages social scientists, theologians, and scholars of religious studies to be more aware of the social significance of spiritual ideas and practices. This movement started to emerge in the second half of the 20th century with the sociologist Roland Robertson's claim that a new field of sociology was developing, which he coined "sociotheology" by the beginning of the 1970s. To him, sociology does not only study religious things but also the way religion is perceived from the religious frame of reference (Juergensmeyer and Sheikh 2013).

What is new to this method is that the sociotheological approach does not fit into the quantitative mold in studying religion. Scholars who pursue this

approach “ask large questions and are willing to step out of conventional social science paradigms to understand the religious dimensions of social perceptions and to explore religious worldviews” (Juergensmeyer 2013, 943). If the disciplinary limits of sociology and theology are creatively maintained, the sociotheological approach can result in greater confidence in the social scientific insights incorporated into theological perspectives (Montgomery 2012).

In this approach, “sociology can be seen to be a relatively benign discipline that can assist theologians in maintaining a sense of perspective and an awareness of their limitations” (Chapman 2008, 10). In the contemporary world, modern sociology is greatly challenging philosophy as the handmaid of theology (Ballano 2021). Catholic moral theology that covers the issue of clerical celibacy has behavioral aspects; thus, it needs the critical approach of sociology as a social science.

Ultimately, this book intends to assist Catholic theologians and Church authorities to better understand the behavioral and theological aspects of celibate and married priesthood through the sociological lens. It aims to apply sociological theories to critically investigate the ascetical, biblical, historical, and theological foundation that defends the mandatory clerical celibacy, whether this is based on sound empirical and doctrinal evidence.

Theoretical Framework

“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” (Atkinson 2005, 594), resulting in equating the word “priesthood” to “celibacy” in the RCC. There is, however, no growing list in the RCC literature that highlights the significance of married priesthood as a valid social calling for Catholic priests. Married priesthood has long existed in the RCC since the foundation of the Church. And yet this has not been adequately defended in the academic field by scholars and theologians, specifically by sociologists and social scientists.

Despite its being a long-running debate for centuries in the RCC, there remains a lack of a specialized research that offers an analysis of the sociological and cultural factors behind the imposition of mandatory clerical celibacy and examines its negative impact on the Catholic priesthood especially in contemporary times. Most studies on clerical celibacy focused on its theological and spiritual dimensions (e.g., Institute for Church Life 2012; Songy 2012; Selin 2016; Benedict XVI and Sarah 2020).

Some social science perspectives focused on its pastoral (e.g., Njua 2005; Gavin 2011; Bernier 2015), and psychological-psychiatric dimensions

of celibacy (e.g., Doyle 2008; Sipe 1990, 2014; Rosetti 1998; Freeman-Coppadge and Horne 2019; Grunau et al. 2022). Others who use historical perspectives examined extensively the empirical and historical factors behind the legislation of mandatory celibacy in the RCC (e.g., Phipps 2004; Stickler 2019; Parish 2000, 2010, 2020; Frazee 1988; Griffiths 2022). The sociological approach, however, is apparently neglected in investigating the behavioral aspects of celibacy.

There is, however, budding research on married priesthood. Fr. Paul Sullins (2015), for instance, published a book, *Keeping the Vow*, that describes the untold life of married Anglican priests in the United States based on 115 interviews with priests and their wives, trying to draw implications on what might happen to priestly celibacy in the future. Thomas Plante (2022) has also added some insights on married priesthood by publishing a brief on the four lessons learned from 1,000 psychological evaluations of clerics and clerical applicants in the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian Churches. There are also other published works in support of married priesthood by family members and children of married priests themselves such as the edited volume by Adam Deville (2021) that offers a comprehensive view on married priesthood and debunks the Western claim of the superiority of celibate priests.

Despite this development, there remains a paucity in the clerical celibacy and married priesthood literature that uses sociological theory and research. Sociology is a social science that provides a holistic and scientific study of society and social behavior. Unfortunately, celibacy as a form of social behavior in the RCC has not been subjected to the empirical and scientific investigation of sociology. The RCC has neglected the behavioral sciences to aid its own understanding of celibate priesthood. And yet celibacy is a social behavior that needs some empirical support to ground the Church's spiritual and theological claims. Celibacy is a non-infallible ecclesial teaching that requires empirical research to fully understand its behavioral implications. As a scientific discipline that studies social behavior, sociology can play a crucial role in understanding the behavioral, social, and cultural aspects of celibacy in society. As Bunnik and others (1966, 81) argue:

There are good reasons for claiming a pre-eminent role of human sciences, such as sociology and psychology, in studies on celibacy. For they give information about the real conditions and needs of man, and the pastoral work is a human service to him, man's condition should set the standards for the work to be imposed on the minister, and if necessary, the kind of life he must lead. Moreover, it is the practical difficulties that, together with the coming of age of the human sciences, have placed the law of celibacy in question.

One important characteristic of sociology is its holistic approach in analyzing social issues, or what the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (2000a) calls “sociological imagination,” that is, a process of connecting the micro to the macro, the individual to the social, biography to history, to see the interconnection of the various societal factors behind a social issue. The sociological approach also analyzes power relations—what happens in the everyday is often the result of the social control and domination of people and groups or what Mills (2000b) calls the power elite in society. The social issue of mandatory clerical celibacy in the RCC boils down to what the power elite in the RCC, that is, the Catholic hierarchy led by the Pope, wants to do with Catholic priesthood. Thus, this book aims to investigate how the various sociological, political, and historical contingencies influence the Catholic hierarchy in legislating and maintaining the mandatory clerical celibacy.

To analyze holistically the various dimensions of clerical celibacy in the RCC, this book applies an eclectic theoretical framework that critically combines sociological and theological perspectives to interpret the qualitative secondary data of the chapters. It is divided into two main parts. In Part I, Chapter 1 primarily uses the social construction theory to analyze the social constructions that defended the imposition of clerical celibacy in the RCC. Chapter 2 fundamentally uses the theory of sociology of law to explain why the RCC imposed the mandatory celibacy law in the 11th and 12th centuries as a strategy for social change and ecclesial reform instead of recognizing the legitimacy of married priesthood based on biblical evidence.

Chapter 3 utilizes sociological theory on social resistance to account for the persistence of clerical concubinage, sexual abuse, and other forms of sexual deviance as silent protest or passive resistance against clerical celibacy law. Instead of recognizing married priesthood as a legitimate social calling which is supported by custom, the RCC imposed the mandatory celibacy resulting in passive clerical social resistance at the backstage of clerical life.

Part II tackles the major urgent issues faced by the Catholic priesthood in the current globalizing world. Specifically, it sociologically investigates the negative consequences of mandatory clerical celibacy on the social, spiritual, and sexual lives of priests, as well as the causal link between clerical celibacy and sexual abuse, priest shortage, and the future of the RCC. It starts with Chapter 4 which primarily employs some sociological theories on globalizations, social alienation, and confluent love to illustrate the new challenges of the current age to Catholic priesthood. It illustrates how married priesthood can greatly address these challenges in contemporary society.

Chapter 5 avails of the sociological theory on social structure to debunk the popular thesis that clericalism is the main enabler of clerical sexual abuse instead of blaming the cleric-centered social structure that is founded on clerical celibacy. Chapter 6 uses the sociological concepts of power and total institution to explore the causal link between clerical celibacy and sexual

abuse. Chapter 7 applies the sociological theory of social anomie to assess how clerical celibacy facilitates acedia or spiritual sloth, and the vocation and spiritual crises of diocesan priests. Chapter 8 utilizes the holistic approach of C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination to understand the serious impact of priest shortages to the Catholic Church as a sacerdotal and sacramental Church. Last, Chapter 9 implicitly applies functionalist analysis to examine the functions and advantages of adopting married priesthood in the RCC in contemporary times.

The RCC remains one of the longest lasting institutions that does not operate as a democracy. It is an unequal society composed of two categories of persons, the shepherd and the flock (Pope Pius X 1906). The non-ordained flock or Catholic laity are not allowed to vote on matters of faith and morals or to elect a pope (Kosloski 2021). It is a religious institution governed by clerics who exercise executive, legislative, and judicial powers in the Church. The RCC is “based on a socio-cultural model of a stratified society with a monarchical system of government ... The leadership is restricted to those in holy orders who are ordained to provide spiritual nourishment and guidance for lay people who constitute the vast majority of the Church” (Doyle 2008, 241–242). Thus, the RCC is monarchical in governance. Legislating and amending clerical celibacy ultimately depends on the decision of the Pope and hierarchy of bishops who possess absolute power on matters concerning Church doctrine and discipline.

Owing to the dominance of the theological and spiritual perspectives on clerical celibacy in the RCC, one can be confused on what is empirical and what is theoretical or theological in ecclesial pronouncements on celibacy. Thus, this book attempts to distinguish the theological, social, and philosophical constructions of clerical celibacy from the empirical and biblical textual data and original teaching of Christ in the gospels. It aims to separate the grain from the husk through sociological winnowing, so to speak, to arrive at the empirical truth of Christ's teaching on married priesthood. It also attempts to convince the Catholic hierarchy, especially the Pope, to change the current law on mandatory celibacy for the good of the RCC and unity of all Christian churches.

Methodology

This research draws on archival or documentary data from secondary literature and studies (see Long-Sutehall 2010; Largan and Morris 2019). They are largely collected from Church documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and media reports. These sources were collated and analyzed to construct the article's main argument and attain the research objectives. Compared to the well-established tradition of re-using quantitative data (Long-Sutehall 2010), the secondary analysis of qualitative data is relatively

recent. According to Irwin and Winterton (2011, 2) secondary analysis broadly refers to the re-use of data produced for prior purposes in order to gain new social scientific and/or methodological knowledge. Secondary data analysis pursues interests that are different to those of the original analysis. “In secondary data analysis (SDA) studies, investigators use data collected by other researchers to address different questions” (Wickham 2019, 395).

This chapter utilizes the SDA and relies on the systematic literature review to find the relevant materials to address the book’s overall objectives and arguments. In its initial literature survey, the author searched for existing reviews, familiarized himself with the research field, identified relevant databases and search terms, and formulated a search strategy to find the relevant online materials for the study (Booth, Papaioannou, and Sutton 2016). The strategy and search terms were generated from the aim and questions and peer-reviewed journal articles and other materials that deal with clerical celibacy and Catholic priesthood were scrutinized and analyzed to achieve the book’s objectives.

Celibacy in the Scriptures and Early Church

Scholars continue to debate on obligatory celibacy for Catholic priesthood. There is no evidence that celibacy is mandatory for Christian leaders in the apostolic times. By the end of the 2nd century, Catholic priests were married although in many cases bishops remained single. Prior to becoming a law,

The celibate way of life was later institutionalized in the development of monastic communities in North Africa, Asia Minor, and subsequently Ireland, Italy, Ethiopia and elsewhere. Nonetheless, marriage before ordination remained an option for the Roman Patriarchate as well as others in Christendom and was a common practice until the 12th century in the West.

(Gogan 2010, 56–57)

The RCC has acknowledged that married priesthood has existed since the New Testament.

It is clear from the New Testament (Mk 1:29–31; Mt 8:14–15; Lk 4:38–39; 1 Tim 3:2, 12; Tit 1:6) that some of Christ’s Twelve Apostles were married, including bishops, presbyters, and Church Fathers. Synodal legislation, papal decretals and other documents in the following centuries had indicated that a married priesthood was a normal feature of the life of the Church.

(Cholij 1989, para. 1)

The RCC has also admitted that mandatory universal clerical celibacy has no biblical foundation. Jesus, in the gospels, teaches that the gift of celibacy is not meant for all. He explicitly taught in Matthew 19:11–12 that not all his disciples can accept the call of remaining celibate (Matt. 19:10).

Jesus declared to the Pharisees, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” His disciples answered to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them: “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given” (Matthew 19: 3–12). In this passage, Jesus did not impose an obligatory celibacy to his disciples—it is only meant to “those to whom it is given.” He only invited them to become eunuchs or celibates for the sake of the kingdom if they can accept it. “Jesus of Nazareth, although he himself is unmarried, did not make celibacy a condition for discipleship” (Küng 2001, 3). The biblical evidence clearly shows that Jesus only advocates optional celibacy and allows his disciples to choose whether to take the celibate or married state in following him (Daniel 2012).

It is also evident in ecclesial history that some of Christ’s Apostles such as St. Peter were married and allowed to be with their families while in roving ministry (Crosby 2003). St. Paul’s expectation of Christ’s imminent return resulted in his recommendation that the unmarried should not seek a wife, “for the Lord was near at hand” (Frazee 1972, 149) but he did altogether reject marriage. For married ministers, he specifically instructed bishops and deacons to be married fathers, “capable of managing their families” (1 Timothy 3). In addition, priests in the early Christian Church were also married and only professed perpetual chastity after they became widowed (Brown 2008).

No Command from Christ to Imitate His Celibate Life and Ministry

It is true that Christ remained celibate throughout his life in total service to God and people in the gospels. All Christians, of course, are called to imitate Christ’s virtuous life. But he did not require his Apostles and disciples to be celibate like him and abstain from marital sex in order to follow him (Kung 2001). There is no biblical evidence to support that Christ commanded his Apostles and disciples to become celibate and abandon their marriage to live a life of continence. As Daniel (2012, 88) aptly pointed out, “Christ allowed His Apostles to freely choose either marriage or celibacy ... an individual’s free choice to marry and propagate or to remain unmarried was permitted, and no restriction against future marriage by unmarried priests existed.”

Thus, the biblical evidence then clearly suggests that Christ envisioned two social callings for people who want to serve him: through marriage or

celibacy. He also never taught that priesthood is only for the celibates. As Mohler (2004) argues, the Sacred Scripture presents marriage and celibacy as both sacred institutions and calling, and that celibacy is only a rare gift:

First, marriage is presented as a sacred institution, a covenant made between the man and the woman before their Creator, and an arena in which the glory of God is demonstrated to the watching world through the goodness of the marital relationship, the one-flesh character of the marital bond, the holiness of marital sex, and the completeness that comes with the gift of children. Second, the Bible presents celibacy as a gift—apparently a rare gift—that is granted to some believers in order that they would be liberated for special service in Christ’s name.

(Mohler 2004, para. 10)

If celibacy is indeed a rare gift, then making it mandatory in the priesthood and an institutional requirement to all priests would unnecessarily lead to their unnecessary labeling and punishment from ecclesial authorities for being deviants or violators of ecclesial or canonical laws. Thousands of priests would have been spared from excommunications and other serious ecclesial sanctions in the past if the RCC had allowed married priesthood as a valid social calling like celibate priesthood in accordance with Christ’s teaching. There remains a lingering empirical issue whether the Catholic hierarchy has disregarded Christ’s teaching on optional celibacy when it imposed mandatory celibacy in the 11th and 12th centuries. Protestant reformers led by Martin Luther posed a legitimate challenge to the RCC:

Celibacy was a gift for God to give, not a duty for the church to impose. It was for each individual, not for the church, to decide whether he or she had received this gift. By demanding monastic vows of chastity and clerical vows of celibacy, the church was seen to be intruding on Christian freedom and contradicting Scripture, nature, and common sense.

(Witte Jr. 2006, 5)

St. Paul and Pastoral Letters on Marriage and Celibacy

Aside from Christ’s teaching on optional celibacy in the gospels, St. Paul writings and pastoral letters of the New Testament did not also command obligatory celibacy for Christian disciples. Marriage has represented the norm for adult Christians in every generation since the time of Paul’s writing. This is consistent with the purposes of marriage taught in the Scriptures and acknowledged by St. Paul in several passages that deal with husbands

and wives, parents, and children, as well qualifications for Church leaders. Celibacy is a wonderful gift but a rare one. That is why “St. Paul specifically preached against newly converted Christian-Gnostics who brought with them a belief that all priests must reject desires of the flesh in order to successfully mediate between God and man” (Mohler 2004, 2). As Daniel (2012, 89) explains:

This ascetic and dualistic belief of conflict between flesh and soul was first taught by Plato c.428 BC and spread across the western world with Alexander the Great before 300 BC. By Christ’s time it had made its way into all religions’ beliefs other than Orthodox Judaism and Christianity, who were unique among all beliefs. In defense of married priests St. Paul confronted this new Christian-Gnostic belief. He strongly condemned mandatory celibacy and his teaching was continually supported by later popes who excommunicated Christian-Gnostic converts for their persistent support of mandatory celibacy.

(Daniel 2012, 89)

In addition to St. Paul’s teaching, the “Pastoral Epistles, which probably date from the end of 1st century and the early of 2nd century portray the dutiful husband and father as the ideal steward of the Church, thus supporting married priesthood.” In 1 Timothy 3:2–5, we find the following description of the suitable overseer:

Now a bishop must be above reproach, a husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in any way—for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of Christ’s Church?

The Pastoral Epistles present marriage and family life as virtual prerequisites for pastoral ministry for bishop, presbyter, and deacon (1 Timothy 3:12 for deacons and in Titus 1:6). They do not speak of continence as a precondition for these ministers. On the contrary, they speak about marriage as requirement for a good minister. The proponents of the apostolic origin hypothesis, of course, are aware of these texts. To take account of them, they are forced into arguments that are historically dubious (Deville 2021).

During the early years of Christianity, celibacy was only a voluntary ascetic practice of early Christian monks and some clerics, but not a mandatory practice for the Catholic clergy. Richard Sipe (1990) cited some interesting evidence that revealed the persistence of married priesthood during the early

Church and even identified some popes who were sons of popes, including nine who were sons of either bishops or priests. There is another evidence that showed that some of the Church Fathers were married and kept their families while in the ministry (Mayblin 2019).

The biblical teaching of optional celibacy is affirmed by the RCC's official statement on clerical celibacy, which recognizes that there was no law on obligatory celibacy that existed in the beginning of the Church (Daniel 2012). Thus, Deville (2021) aptly concludes that married priesthood is a fully Catholic, theologically grounded, and venerable tradition like celibate priesthood. Authors Lea (2003) and Sipe (1990) also claimed that celibacy was freely decided by the early Church leaders themselves and was not imposed on the apostolic Church.

The historian Helen Parish (2010) argues that the concept of clerical celibacy is inadequate when applied to the history of the Church. The law of clerical celibacy did not originate during the early Church since it is evident that the early Christian priesthood comprised both married and unmarried men. The universal obligatory celibacy was only imposed during the post-apostolic period. In fact, the first universal decree on clerical celibacy was enforced in the First Lateran Council in the 11th century and confirmed with finality in 12th century by the Fourth Lateran Council.

The concept of obligatory celibacy did not therefore originate from the Scriptures nor from the primitive Church, but from the Medieval period, prompting some authors to call it a Medieval aberration. The RCC acknowledges up to the present that celibacy is not essential to Catholic priesthood. The Second Vatican Council, a universal gathering of all bishops and the Pope convened between 1962–1965 to update and adapt Church teachings to modern times, clarified that virginity and celibacy were not a requirement by the nature of Catholic priesthood. The RCC recognizes that “the priesthood of Christ, in which all priests really share, is necessarily intended for all peoples and all times, and it knows no limits of blood, nationality or time” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 1965, no. 10). But this is not only for celibates.

Paul IV's encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* [Clerical Celibacy] (1967, No. 17), which is a primary document concerning the Church's stand on celibacy, also acknowledged that celibacy

is not, indeed, demanded by the very nature of the priesthood, as is evident from the practice of the primitive church and from the tradition of Eastern Churches. Married priesthood of the early Church and the traditions of the Eastern Churches has affirmed the legitimacy of this practice in the Church.

(*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* 1967, No. 11)

The Sacred Scriptures attested that being celibate is only a unique option for some people, Christ's followers need not have to observe perpetual celibacy (Li, Liu, and Wan 2022). Both married and celibate priesthood are based upon the same theological foundations and are expressions of the one and same priesthood. They both grounded in Christ's original teaching in Sacred Scriptures (Petra and Cross 2010).

In fact, celibate and married priesthood co-existed in the RCC from the time of Apostles up to the present age. Catholic priests in the Uniate churches, for instance, who are under the papal authority such as those in Ukraine, Hungary, or Lebanon are married. In the tradition of the Christian East, married priesthood is not a calling to be devalued and barely tolerated. It is a sacred calling of priesthood (Petra and Cross 2010).

Married Priesthood in the RCC

There is a growing awareness in the RCC that married priesthood is indeed a legitimate social calling and must be allowed in the Church. And yet there is a hesitancy on the part of the Catholic hierarchy to allow it universally. But this has changed significantly with the current leadership of the RCC, especially under the stewardship of Pope Francis. Since his election in 2013, Pope Francis has shown more pastoral openness to married priesthood. In 2014, for instance, he approved the lifting of a 114-year ban “on the ordination of married men to the priesthood in Eastern Catholic churches outside their traditional territories, including in the United States, Canada and Australia” (Eiraci 2014, para. 1).

In one of his earliest decisions as pope, he permitted married Anglican priests to join the Ordinariates, resulting in the admission of married priests from a wide range of traditional Anglican groups (not just the Episcopal Church) to the American Catholic Church. In an interview with the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, he also hinted that he might allow the ordination of married men to work in rural areas with priest shortage (Waxman 2017).

On October 6–27, 2019, Pope Francis also manifested his openness to married priesthood when he convened the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region in Rome to allow a discussion and decision whether to ordain or not the *viri probati*, that is, married men with proven exemplary faith, to address priest shortage in the Amazon region (O'Connell and Hansen 2019). Although he set aside the recommendation by most synod participants who overwhelmingly voted in favor of ordination of married men in the region, Pope Francis remains open to amending the mandatory clerical celibacy law to freely permit married priesthood in the RCC. To him, celibacy is God's gift but subject to historical change.

Allowing married priesthood is not something new in the RCC. The RCC had popes in the past who were also legally married or children or

descendants of married priests, bishops, and popes. Doherty (2018, 3), for instance, noted that

some forty popes were legally married, and some, including Gregory the Great (590–604), were the children or descendants of married priests, bishops, and popes. From the end of the fourth century to the last years of the tenth, three popes had sons who succeeded them as pope, one pope was the son of a bishop, and seven popes were the offspring of priests.

A married clergy has also long existed in the RCC in a variety of rites and customs that originated with the birth of the Church itself (Gogan 2010). It existed since the New Testament with some of Christ's Apostles who were married. It continued to exist in some form in the RCC's Eastern Catholic Christianity until present times. Celibate priesthood is not obligatory in Uniate churches, that is, churches which celebrated the liturgy according to the Orthodox model but remain strongly loyal to the Pope (Bourdeaux 2005). These churches returned to the RCC after the Eastern Schism (1054), the biggest of which is the Ukraine Catholic Church with married priests and deacons (Cholij 1989).

The patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Moscow, which are currently under the administration of the Pope and the Vatican, also have a married clergy. The Greek Catholic Church in Eastern Europe such as Romania and Hungary also have married priests in their clergy (Hoppenbrouwers 2006). Although not recognized universally by the RCC, married priesthood has long been practiced in the Western rite just like in the Ancient and Eastern Orthodox tradition (Gogan 2010). Currently, around 20 percent of Catholic priests are married. These are the priests of the Eastern Catholic Churches such as those in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, or Lebanon, which are under the jurisdiction of the Pope (Vogels 1993).

Furthermore, there is a growing openness of the laity to married priesthood in the RCC. The current attitude of Catholics is increasingly supportive of a married clergy. Pew research (2014, 2015), for instance, showed that between 62 and 72 percent of US Catholics believe priests should be allowed to marry, despite the Church's mandatory celibacy policy (Pew Research 2014, 4, , 2015). The majority of Catholic laity also believed, as revealed in this survey, that some of the social ills such as homosexuality and clerical sexual abuse of the RCC can be resolved by allowing a married clergy. Another 2014 Pew poll in Latin America, which is largely Catholic, further showed that a median of 48 percent of Catholics think priests should also be allowed to marry. Brazil, the largest Catholic country in the world, specifically manifested a strong support for married priesthood with 56 percent of Catholics approving priests to marry.

In the United States, most Hispanic Catholics also favor changing the RCC's traditional position on clerical celibacy with 59 percent saying that priests should be permitted to marry (Pew Research 2014). Although these surveys were carried out in 2014 and 2015, it is unlikely that public support

has declined for married priesthood. Many Catholics believe that married priests are more emotionally and sexually stable than celibate priests who can be vulnerable to sexual abuse. Research further shows that celibate priests are not spiritually superior compared to married priests (Swenson 1998). Finally, the pioneering research of the sociologist-married priest Fr. Peter Sullins (2018) on the life of former Episcopalian married clergy who became Catholic priests in the US under the title “Keeping the Vow: The Untold Stories of Married Catholic Priests” indicated wide acceptance by both priests and lay Catholics for married clerics.

Last, allowing a universal married priesthood in the RCC is supported by well-known theologians and Catholic authors who think that it is about time for the Church to permit it. The famous Swiss theologian Hans Kung, for instance, showed support for married priesthood as he lamented on the decreasing number of priests in his country, which he thinks was caused by clerical celibacy. The eminent Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner even wrote a secret letter to the Catholic hierarchy urging bishops to change the celibacy rule for the good of Church (Küng 2013). The Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx, another popular theologian in the RCC, is also in favor of married priesthood, seeing clerical celibacy and abstinence as primarily a pagan and neo-platonic influence in the RCC (Schillebeeckx and Nadeau 1984). Thus, if married priesthood has long existed in the RCC, supported by great theologians and scholars and a growing number of Catholics, why is it not universally allowed as a valid social calling of Catholic priesthood in current times? Is mandatory clerical celibacy really based on sound biblical teaching and doctrine when the RCC legislated it?

The traditional view that celibacy is a better choice for the clergy because it frees the person from concerns of marriage and children and enables a person to devote fully his life to God and become more mature spiritually lacks solid biblical and doctrinal foundation (Swenson 1998). This is the product of a long history of the social construction of the Catholic hierarchy and popular Catholic writers and theologians who are largely swayed by Manicheism and other non-Christian cultural influences that are incorporated haphazardly into the RCC’s Orthodox teachings.

Thus, if married priesthood is a valid social calling of Catholic priesthood and supported by biblical evidence and ecclesial practice, why does the RCC still not universally recognize it? How does the RCC socially and theologically justify the idea of a universal celibate priesthood? What are the major social constructions in ecclesial history to uphold the legitimacy of celibate priesthood as the only legitimate expression of Catholic priesthood?

Dominant Social Constructions of Clerical Celibacy in the RCC

The RCC, following Christ’s biblical teaching, has always been positive with marriage and celibacy as God’s gift. Viewing sexuality as unclean even within

marriage, women as inferior and the cause of men's downfall, the inferiority of marriage to celibacy, and emphasizing virginity and celibate priesthood as the only valid social calling of Catholic priesthood is largely a cultural influence of Manicheanism and monasticism during the Medieval period. This was inevitable as Christianity interacted with the pagan Hellenistic and Roman culture. "Religion is a cultural phenomenon, a subculture within our larger cultural system" (Hogan 1982, 365). Thus, the evolving Catholic teaching on marriage and clerical celibacy is not only influenced by Scriptures but also by social constructions of the RCC and some popular Catholic writers on clerical celibacy, as well as by dominant pagan cultural beliefs of the age.

One of such cultural influences that resulted in social constructions that favor the obligatory clerical celibacy legislation in the 12th century is the pagan negative view on sexual ethics and sexuality and preference for celibacy in Christian discipleship.

The gradual influence of the values of virginity, sexual abstinence, and eventually celibacy developed against a backdrop of negativity toward sexuality. Paul's teaching that Christ was soon to return and, therefore, that it might be recommendable to abstain from marriage in order to prepare for the *parousia* [second coming of Christ] was a factor. The idea that sexual pleasure, even within marriage, was suspicious and that it should be used only for begetting children indicates serious reservations about sexuality.

(Gariépy 2007, 16)

Thus, the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx has aptly argued that the Western practice of celibacy was not primarily based on biblical teaching but on unchristian ideas concerning sex and purity (Wagner-Wassen 2021). Secular and cultural ideas of the time had reconstructed Christ's teaching on marriage and celibacy. Before the legislation of mandatory celibacy in the 12th century, the unchristian ideas of Manicheanism and Cluniac monasticism greatly changed and distorted Christ's original teaching on optional celibacy, making clerical celibacy the only way to Catholic priesthood.

Manichean Construction

Manicheanism is an eclectic sect that began in the second half of the 3rd century by a Persian aristocrat named Mani. This sect aims to combine Zoroastrianism with some beliefs of Christianity and Buddhism. It teaches a dualistic understanding of the universe as a battlefield between light and darkness, as well as spirit and matter. Individuals consist of spirit and matter who internalize this cosmic fight. Women are seen as instruments of darkness and bondage of men to the flesh. Manicheanism also saw it necessary to mortify and discipline the body to conquer evil (Lea 2003).

The common Manichean features were alliance of faith and reason for the pursuit of ultimate knowledge, a strong syncretism. Its abhorrence of the body, marriage, and women had contributed to the negative Christian thinking on sexuality and marriage and preference for virginity and celibacy. According to Baker-Brian, Manicheanism has penetrated the cultural apparatus of Orthodox Christianity (e.g., its name and scriptures and it poisoned the purity of Christian teachings by integrating them with Greek philosophical ideas (Brian-Baker in Reis 2012). “The influence of Manicheanism is extensive. It spread from the third to the seventh centuries over the whole of the Mediterranean world, extending from Syria, Asia Minor, Judea to Egypt, northern Africa, Spain, southern Gaul, and Italy, and penetrated two centers of Christian Roman civilization, Rome, and Byzantium” (Oblensky 1948, 8).

After the Christian movement emphasized and institutionalized Manicheanism, some its religious beliefs became inseparable from the Christian faith (Pagels in Gariépy 2007). During the Medieval church era, for instance, Manichean beliefs have pervasively led to a negative attitude towards marriage and sexual expression within marriage. Justyn Martyr, for instance, taught that there was no benefit to marriage beyond having children. Clement of Alexandria also preached that marriage was good, but only for the sake of procreation (Lane 2006). Manicheanism is a major influence in the social reconstruction of marriage, sexuality, and celibacy in the RCC leading to the legislation of mandatory clerical celibacy.

The Manichean construction has resulted in the unchristian belief that sex is impure and sinful. This unintendedly influenced Catholic priesthood through the years. For instance, the RCC demanded the cultic purity of its priests. Those who want to celebrate the Holy Mass should be separate from other men. “They could not have intercourse with their wives and then officiate at the altar, contaminating every liturgical action with their impurity” (Armstrong-Partida 2009, 224).

The cultural influence of Manicheanism further spread in the RCC through the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, two popular theologians and doctors of the Church who incorporated some Manicheanism beliefs in their teachings on marriage, sexuality, and celibacy, thereby exulting celibacy and downplaying the sacredness of marriage.

St. Augustine of Hippo, for instance, taught that virginity is more virtuous than marriage (O’Reggio 2012). He also portrayed “the marital union as somewhat of a necessary evil that we must endure for the sake of procreation, even going so far as ascribing a form of sinfulness to sexual intercourse within marriage” (Clark, ed. 1996, 6). St. Augustine regarded people’s sexual drive as a product of the Fall and marriage as an instrument of God to control lust and make it less morally offensive (Clark, ed. 1996). This Augustinian view on the superiority of celibacy and virginity over marriage has been dominating the Catholic theology for centuries, influencing other popular

Catholic writers. It influenced the Christian monk John of Damascus, who also maintained that God would have multiplied the first pair by means other than marital sex, and the early Church Father John Chrysostom who believed in ideal marriage which could not equal the virtue of celibacy (Schaff 1889).

St Augustine's teaching has greatly influenced the Church's long-standing traditional view on sexuality and marriage. It largely influenced the RCC's official teaching until the 20th century. "Augustine taught that continence is better than marriage, but marriage is better than fornication. His view was that intercourse is totally legitimate, even within marriage, only in order to procreate, although he believed that a certain degree of intemperance is to be tolerated in the case of married persons. He believed that the use of matrimony for the mere pleasure of lust is a 'venial' sin. It is conceivable that Augustine's views concerning reproduction were also influenced by a sentiment of 'impurity' attached to sexual intercourse that preceded Christianity" (Benagiano and Mori 2009, 54–55).

St. Thomas Aquinas, another great doctor of the RCC, has also held some Manichean beliefs, deferring to Augustine's writings. He stressed that celibacy is to be preferred by Christians over marriage, even a chaste marriage or a marriage without sexual intercourse. This view on the inferiority of marriage to celibacy and preference to virginity to serve God persisted throughout the Medieval period until the time of the Reformation (Agana 2018). The negative Manichean view on sexuality as something dirty and unclean even within marriage vows has degraded Christian marital union. Indeed, the influential writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas that contained Manichean ideas on the abhorrence of the body, degradation of women, inferiority of marriage over celibacy, and clerical celibacy as the more perfect Christian life had reconstructed Christ's teaching of the sanctity of marriage and optional celibacy.

Monastic Construction

Aside from Manicheanism, the strict monastic teaching on virginity and celibacy as the ideal way to live the Christian life has also reconstructed Christ's teaching on optional celibacy and reinforced the negative view on marriage and sexuality. Pope Gregory I, for instance, "reminded married men that God provided the conjugal bed as a lawful refuge from the perils of lust" (McNamara 1999, 9). The ideal concept of Catholic priesthood that has influenced the imposition of mandatory celibacy in the 11th and 12th centuries is a type of priesthood that is not fully founded on the Scripture but on "ruling monastic ideas" of the times espoused by popes, bishops, and leading spiritual and theological writers of clerical celibacy.

Conversely, monasticism did not start in Europe but in Egypt. Then, it spread into Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor with staggering expansion

from there. Athanasius and his Egyptian monks brought monasticism to the West. Most of these monks were laymen. With their edifying life of extreme self-denial, several priests began to adopt the celibate life of the monks, characterized by virginity and extreme self-denial (Frazee 1972). In fact, the leading Church reformer and proponent of clerical celibacy during this era, Pope Gregory VII, was a monk himself, educated and spiritually trained in the strict monastic tradition of the Cluny monastery.

To Gregory VII, clerical celibacy is a *sine qua non* or essential condition of the priesthood (Pandele 2016), an interpretation that is contrary to Christ's original teaching of optional celibacy. But canonists and theologians in the eleventh and twelfth centuries who established legal foundations for the doctrine of clerical celibacy supported this papal belief (Guijaro 2013). The Cluniac monastic ideals on virginity and celibacy reinforced the Manichean negative view on marriage and sexuality and the preference for celibacy and virginity. "The monastic system among other things emphasized being alone as a means to facilitate the attainment of spiritual virtue" (Lawrence 1989, 1). It also taught that several ascetic practices should be employed to discipline the body in order to achieve spiritual growth. Ordinary pleasures must be renounced or done in moderation. Monasticism is partly responsible for the influence of a heresy that saw the flesh as inherently evil, thus virginity and celibacy is preferred for clerics (Lawrence 1989).

It was only during the Reformation that this traditional notion of inferiority of marriage to celibate priesthood caused by Manichean and monastic influence became widely challenged and criticized. Martin Luther spoke out against monasteries, and against clerical celibacy. Luther exalted marriage and child rearing as "an outward and spiritual sign of the greatest, holiest, worthiest and noblest thing that ever existed or will ever exist: the union of the divine and human nature in Christ" (Agana 2018, 91). According to the Sacred Scripture, marriage is not only about self-esteem, personal fulfillment, and lifestyle option, but a sacrament that is founded on God's glory as manifested in creation. The man and the woman are made for each other, and the institution of marriage is given to humanity as both opportunity and obligation (Mohler 2004).

From Genesis to Revelation, the Sacred Scripture assumes that marriage is normative for human beings.

The responsibilities, duties, and joys of marriage are presented as matters of spiritual significance. From a Christian perspective, marriage must never be seen as a mere human invention—an option for those who choose such a high level of commitment—for it is an arena in which God's glory is displayed in the right ordering of the man and the woman, and their glad reception of all that marriage means, gives, and requires.

(Mohler 2004, 1)

Gender Construction of Celibate Masculinity

To justify the social construction of a new gender created by mandatory clerical celibacy during the 12th century, the RCC had conceived of a third sex for the new celibate male whose primary role is to celebrate the Eucharist, pure and clean from sexual and marital impurities. Thus, theological writings before the legislation of celibacy in the 11th and 12th centuries need to socially construct a new type of masculinity different from lay masculinity to support celibate priesthood. R. N. Swenson (1999) in his essay “Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation,” calls this “third gender” “emasculinity” (Miller 2003).

The celibate priests during this reform era “described themselves unambiguously, and in increasingly assertive terms, as men: papal correspondence in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, for example, applied the adverb *viriliter* (‘in a manly fashion’) to an expanding range of clerical actions” (Miller 2003, 28). Under this construction,

sexual intercourse for members of the clergy defiles them and makes them unworthy of the ministry. The clergy belong to a higher order, more is expected of them. Their life of celibacy sets them apart as being true Christians since marriage is really only a concession to man’s weakness and results from sin.

(Frazee 1972, 155)

Sixth-century Gallic councils repeatedly tried to initiate the married clergy into the third gender by legislating abstention from conjugal relations. The imposition of sexual abstinence on clerical couples depended on their mutual capacity for self-control. Fears of pollution, deeply rooted in Christianity’s Jewish history, prompted commands for priests to withdraw from their wives in preparation for sacred rituals.

(McNamara 1999, 10)

Under this new gender construction,

the priest is seen as a male whose role was to give orientation and spiritual guidance to other men and women, and whose influence depended, beyond the obvious powers conferred upon him by the church, on his personal authority, based on his own ability to relate to the social circumstances around him, which did not exclude considerations of his gender.

(Romeo Mateo 2021, 542)

This social construction of the Gregorian reform movement that idealized celibate masculinity to defend the imposition of mandatory clerical celibacy did not suit well in empirical reality as not all priests possessed the gift of

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