

# Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

# Should celibacy remain a compulsory vow in the life of Roman Catholic Priests?

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## Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to inform men who are considering joining the catholic priesthood about clerical celibacy. It is necessary to be aware of the origins of compulsory celibacy and how achievable this may be as a way of life. Being well educated on this issue will aid the decision process of someone considering whether to join the catholic priesthood, remain a lay person or alternatively change denomination to become a vicar in the Church of England, for example, where marriage is permitted.

This guide will include a glossary of terms which may require further explanation; these will be **highlighted** throughout the guide. This is in addition to an annotated bibliography in the case that the reader wishes to conduct further reading or clarify the reliability of the sources used. I will present a balanced two-sided argument showing the origins of compulsory celibacy, its advantages and disadvantages and the potential future of change.

## Case Study:

Accessible at: <http://bobnational.net/record/139858> (2.10-3.51)

The video taken from *4Thought.TV* is of a man, Robin Maxted, who identifies as a Roman Catholic and tells of his reasoning for resigning from the priesthood. It is worth noting that this video was aired on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013, a time in which the Church was awaiting a new Pope due to the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI. **Compulsory celibacy** was preventing Robin to continue his relationship with his female partner, who he has now been married to for eighteen years. Before marriage, both Robin and his wife tried several times to finish their relationship for the sake of his priesthood. After renouncing his title, Robin had to marry in a registry office rather than a church which then caused him to lose the

right to communion. Robin talks of his distress at the Roman Catholic Church as it doesn't listen to the congregation, who for him are the centre of the Church. He also stresses that the new Pope, who we now know to be Pope Francis, should change the rule of compulsory celibacy as it 'causes a barrier to the development of one's humanity.'

#### What were the origins and reasoning behind the enforcement of clerical celibacy?

Although one of the earliest attempts to enforce celibacy upon bishops can be traced back to the **Council of Nicaea** in 325 AD (Blenkinsopp, 1969, p.20), it was in the 12<sup>th</sup> century that it was officially enforced. The effects of the **Reformation** saw the **The Council of Trent** upholding clerical celibacy as an established discipline within the Catholic Church. (Parish, 2010, p.2) There are several contrasting views regarding the reasoning for which the Church imposed celibacy upon priests. According to Helen Parish, it 'continues to be defined in relation to scripture, **apostolic** tradition, **ecclesiastical** history, and papal authority.' (2010, p.13)

It is often difficult to determine if scripture instructs Church leaders to take a vow of celibacy or whether it, in fact, encourages married life. One biblical quote which is often used to support clerical celibacy is 'An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. (Corinthians 7:32-34, New International Version) Depending on how this is to be interpreted, one may understand celibacy to be encouraged as it is a discipline in which a man's full attention can be given to God. This could be said to support the controversial view that abstaining from marriage and sexual relations is often synonymous with **holiness**.

On the other hand, the Bible also talks of an 'overseer', which is considered old English for 'bishop', who should be 'faithful to his wife' and 'manage his own family well.' (1 Timothy 3:1-4) For some people, this biblical quote provides proof that priesthood and married life are compatible.

What complicates matters even further is the example of Christ. Although there is no explicit mention of Jesus' sexuality in scripture, he is often assumed to be unmarried which carries reasoning for those vowing to be celibate in order to imitate Jesus. (Parish, 2010, p.20) This selection of Biblical passages

and themes present a brief insight into the difficulty of exegesis since different interpretations can be used to both support and reject clerical celibacy.

#### What are the advantages of compulsory celibacy?

Helen Parish provides two main answers to the question of celibacy being a fulfilment of holiness. Firstly she records a potential response from Roman Catholics that freedom from marital commitments allows the priest to remain fully committed to God, the Church and its people. This practicality, spoken of at the **Second Vatican Council**, ensures there are no distractions from home or family life. Secondly, the sacrificial role of the priest requires sexual purity to be adhered to in order to function as the mediator between God and his people. (Parish, 2010, p.5) This is more fully understood upon consideration of the vast gap between God, who is a transcendent being and has shown his benevolence to all, and man, who is limited to the marriage of earthly love with another. It could be argued that the priest, who remains abstinent, lessens that chasm.

A similar but more comprehensive view of priest Ernest Larkin, which was presented at a conference of diocesan priests in 1966, uses personal, ecclesial, redemptive and **eschatological** reasons as to why the priesthood remain celibate to this day. Firstly, he uses personal reasoning to argue that those from an outside perspective, namely non-Roman Catholics, limit the meaning of celibacy as a negation of having a wife and children. From Larkin's insider's perspective, the varying levels of love place the marriage of a man and a wife below the transcendence of celibacy allowing a priest to 'marry a whole parish.' The different way of life that is described by the priest, and supported by Cardinal Leger, includes devoting more time to prayer, **mortification** and dedication and requires aid from accepting friends and community to reach perfection.

Larkin's ecclesial view point presents celibacy as a God-given gift which allows the priest to progress as an individual and provide witness to the Kingdom. Larkin reminds his fellow priests that the vow of celibacy is a repetition of the renunciation made at baptism to remain focused on the divine service to God. He places emphasis on faith arguing that it is vital in its joining with abstinence to allow the practice of celibacy to be authentic.

The priest contends that there is a very practical, redemptive aspect to celibacy through the pastoral care that the priesthood provides to the congregation. This belief is deepened through the discussion of pastoral love; it is argued that a celibate priest imitates Christ through ‘the pouring out of his life in union’. This is depicted by clerical celibacy being likened with the cross of Christ.

Lastly, celibacy is presented as having an eschatological element. The vow taken on by priests is a reminder to the Church of the end times in which the only marriage to exist is between man and God. Clerical celibacy is therefore said to be bringing the Kingdom of God closer to Earth.

Larkin provided his four reasonings at the conference with an expectation of his fellow priests to renew their vow of celibacy. (1968, pp. 43-47)

#### What are the disadvantages of compulsory celibacy?

In response to the Roman Catholic belief that celibacy enhances pastoral charity, an advocate of a married clergy would argue that the advice given by celibate priests to lay members is uninformed. The reasoning behind this lies in the lack of mutual experience of marital and sexual relations. Joseph Blenkinsopp is one such scholar who agrees that the favourable minister to guide the congregation by experience and observation is a married one. (1969, p. 43) This begs the question whether one has to be experienced in an area to provide guidance on it. Addressing the argument that Roman Catholics have less distraction, Blenkinsopp uses his own experience of working at Catholic and Protestant theological seminaries to argue that the married Protestant students with children are just as productive, if not more, than the Catholic celibate students. (1969, p. 44)

Elizabeth Abbot, using a study in America, claims that half of the catholic clergy do not live a celibate life despite committing to this vow. (2001, p. 286) Using this as a backdrop, celibacy is often questioned as an achievable way of life. Richard A. Schoenherr and David Yamane focus their attention on the collapse of celibate exclusivity in the Roman Catholic Church due to priest shortage. Using the experiences of American men who have considered priesthood as a vocation, the authors used their studies to argue that there is a poor recruitment rate. The majority of youths questioned claimed that they were deterred by the abolition of marriage. Using a different study, the dwindling

**retention** rates of priests are said to be caused by loneliness since the priests lack companionship. The authors use this basis to maintain that the priest shortage is a driving force to change the rule on celibacy. (2002, pp. 20-21) Despite this, Schoenherr and Yamane still believe a celibate life can be a successful one 'for those who are called.' (2002, pp. 190-191) Blenkinsopp also supports the optional choice of celibacy for the individuals who feel that it will enhance their life. The most important test, he suggests, is the choice between married or celibate life. (1969, p. 54) One could argue that if celibacy were to be made optional, choosing it as a way of life would grant more merit than being celibate by obligation.

Another argument against compulsory celibacy lies in the issue of **patriarchy**. Rosemary Radford Ruether discusses the use of the patriarchal **order of creation** used to justify the superiority of men in higher ecclesiastical positions; while celibate women were deemed only suitable for convents, the vow of celibacy was forced upon men who were already married. She argues that this early Christian construct became rooted in the Christianity which still exists today through the female being depicted as a wife, a lay member and a body to be dominated over. (1985, p. 330) Yet, it is important to consider the wife's role within the case study: They both tried to stop their relationship which suggests she genuinely supported her partner in his role and fulfilment as a celibate priest.

Abbott concurs with Ruether through her insistence that the Roman Catholic Church have **misogynistic** values. She highlights this through the exception that the Church made in accepting ex-Anglican married priests into the Catholic priesthood. This decision occurred at a time which saw the Anglican Church allow women into the priesthood. For Abbott, not only did this undermine Roman Catholic members who had to choose between celibacy and marriage, but it reflected their disapproval of gender equality. (2001, pp. 382-383)

If celibacy were to be made optional, what would the potential effects be?

For those who focus on the disadvantages of clerical celibacy, changing this vow will undoubtedly bring into question other issues that need addressing such as allowing women into the Catholic

priesthood. It is therefore argued to be the driving force for bigger change to occur in the Roman Catholic Church. This links with another assumed change that the option to marry will allow priests to be spiritually equal to the laity. It is stated that the laypeople will reclaim their value whilst their marriage gains authenticity through holiness. (Schoenherr et al., 2002, p. 191)

Having said this, committed celibate priests have made a vow based upon scripture, which for them is the ultimate Word of God, in addition to other important decisions made throughout ecclesiastical history. The Second Vatican Council announced that the gift of virginity is given to priests from God through humbly praying. (Larkin, 1968, p. 430) It could be predicted that the introduction of married clergymen would require priests to reject the **charism** provided from God and move further away from the kingdom of heaven; a goal which has been pursued for almost two thousand years.

## Glossary

**Apostolic**- Relating to the teaching and practice of the twelve apostles, otherwise known as Jesus' disciples.

**Charism**- Used in Christian theology to denote a good gift that flows from God's love to humans.

**Compulsory celibacy**/Clerical celibacy- The vow which Roman Catholic Priests have to abide by throughout their priesthood which involves abstinence from marriage and sexual relations.

**Council of Nicaea**- The first ecumenical council of the Christian Church, held in 325. It was an assembly of bishops called by the emperor Constantine to deal with the Arian controversy.

**Ecclesiastical**- Relating to the Christian Church or its clergy.

**Eschatological**- the teachings in the Bible concerning the end times or of the period of time dealing with the return of Christ and the events that follow.

**Holiness**- The state of being set apart for God, or for religious purposes

**Misogynistic**- Exhibiting hatred, dislike, mistrust, or mistreatment of women.

**Mortification**- The 'killing', especially through ascetic practices, of unruly or disordered appetites which are detrimental to spiritual advance.

**Order of creation**- The book of Genesis in the Bible describes the creation of all things which is ascribed to God.

**Patriarchy**- Social organization based on the authority of a senior male, usually the father, over a family.

**Reformation**- A religion and political movement of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe that began as an attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church and resulted in the establishment of the Protestant Churches.

**Retention**- The continued possession of something.



**Second Vatican Council**- Twenty-first ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church. It was convened by Pope John XXIII to revive Christian faith and move the Church into closer touch with ordinary people.

**The Council of Trent**- Nineteenth ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, held in Trent, Italy, which provided the main impetus of the Counter-Reformation in Europe.

## Annotated Bibliography

Abbott, E. (2001). *A History of Celibacy*. Boston: Da Capo Press.

- Abbott provides a historical examination of celibacy over a 3,000 year period. She is a dynamic writer who gives a very broad and interdisciplinary overview of celibacy through a variety of religions, literature and ancient mythology. Therefore, although an interesting and accessible read, only a small portion of this book is relevant to both celibacy and Roman Catholicism.

Blenkinsopp, J. (1969). *Celibacy, Ministry, Church*. London, UK: Burns & Oates Limited.

- Although at points it is clear that Blenkinsopp is an advocate for changing compulsory celibacy, he does not impose his views on the reader. Rather, he successfully conducts a theological analysis on the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church which he believes to be dictated by the perception that ministry and priesthood are synonymous. The book title presents the perspective that the changing vow of celibacy will open the doors to a reformed understanding on Christian ministry, allowing the religion to be accessible universally. He writes coherently with a strong focus on history in order to look to the future. The first half of the book is more concerned with clerical celibacy with the rest focused on scripture and Church roles.

Larkin E.E. (1968) 'Clerical Celibacy', *Bulletin, Guild of Catholic Psychiatrists*, 15(1), pp. 43-47.

- This article is in the form of a speech which was given at a conference of diocesan priests in 1966. The Roman Catholic Priest, although considerate of contrasting views, writes passionately of his justification of celibacy as a vow of the priesthood in response to the scrutiny faced. The four main reasons he provides, although very biased, provide an insight into the world of Roman Catholic priests and the extent to which they will go to remain committed to God. Despite it being an easy read, it is important to remember that the

rationalisations given by priests to remain celibate may have altered over the previous fifty years.

Parish, H. (2010). *Clerical Celibacy in the West: c.1100-1700*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

- Helen Parish gives a comprehensive, historical account of clerical celibacy beginning from early Christianity through to the Modern Church. Clerical celibacy is discussed within each era which allows the reader to witness how this issue is both questioned and answered differently as time progresses. It is interdisciplinary and not confined to one stream of Christianity or one geographical location. Her lack of clear bias and concise factual approach make the book suitable for those who both possess and lack knowledge in this area without enforcing her views on the reader.

Ruether, R.R. (1985) 'The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy', *New Blackfriars* 66(781-782), p. 330.

- Ruether, an American feminist scholar and Catholic theologian, argues that the doctrine of Christ is used to exclude women from full participation in the Church. She explains that whilst scripture is not explicitly biased towards men, it is the patriarchal culture which has shaped how God is viewed as male. Although the journal is relatively short, Ruether writes with passion in regards to ridding Christianity of its androcentric bias so that the true ministry of Jesus can be revealed and used to bring good news to the oppressed, which in this case are women.

Schoenherr, R.A., and Yamane, D. (2002). *Goodbye father: The celibate male priesthood and the future of the Catholic Church*. New York: Oxford University press.

- These two authors use a number of studies to show the decline in priest's recruitment and retention and how this should be used as the driving force behind the change of compulsory celibacy. Their argument is clear, concise and provides answers using sociological analysis to the big questions relating to the priest shortage and its effects on the Roman Catholic Church.

Although he may offend current Catholic priests, he writes with respect for the Church and it is certainly a valuable book to those requiring an insight into clerical celibacy and its future.