Forbidding to Marry?
By William Schnoebelen

One of the better known feathers of the Roman Catholic church is its requirement that priests, bishops, and members of monastic orders refrain from marrying. Many of these celibates are held up as great models of sanctity. Indeed some of them, down through the centuries, have lived lives of great spiritual heroism. There is no denying this.

It is made clear that the celibate state is considered more holy than married state in Catholicism. Much is made of the doctrine of the “perpetual virginity” of Mary, even though scriptures do not support this Catholic belief. Catholics are taught that Mary was still a virgin after giving birth to Christ, and that she remained a virgin the rest of her life. It is also firmly taught that Christ was celibate, although the Bible is silent about this. One often hears that John was especially holy since he died a virgin (chapter and verse on that please?)

Because of this, the Roman church is one of the few religious institutions with a celibate clergy. Even the Orthodox rites allow married priests and of course, the Anglican and Episcopal churches have married clergy, as do all Protestants. The Bible basis for mandatory celibacy is nil. Unmarried rabbis were unheard of in Mosaic law, and the priests and Levites were married. Indeed, marriage was considered a sacred duty in Israel.

A Look at the Bible

Basically, the celibacy requirement is based on two passages in the New Testament:

Matt. 19:12 For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

[Paul writing:] But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment. For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they

1 See Matt. 1:25 – “and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS”. Also a few references to Yah'shua's brothers and sisters (as in Matt. 12:46, Matt. 13:55, Ps. 69:8).
In the first passage, Yah’shua (Jesus) is obviously talking about those who make themselves eunuchs for the Almighty. He is not talking about imposing celibacy as a requirement externally (as Rome does). No one is saying that if a believer feels that God has called him or her to a single state that they should not follow that call.

However, the Vatican says if you want to serve YHWH as a priest, you must be celibate. You have no other choice in the matter.

In the passage above, nowhere does Yah’shua tie being a eunuch to serving in the ministry. In fact, most of the apostles and early church leaders were married. If this was such an important issue, why was no mention made of this requirement anywhere in scripture?

Concerning Paul’s words, note first of all that he is speaking of permission, not commandment. What he is saying is not mandatory. This is highlighted by verse 7, where he states that everyone has “his proper gift of God” one in one manner, and one in another. This emphasizes the “gift” nature of the celibate state. One is usually not forced to accept a gift. Additionally, since not everyone has this gift, one could not legislate its application in a lock-step manner as Rome has.

Another element in verse 7 needs to be looked at is that Paul wishes all men were as he was himself. What exactly does that mean? Well, first of all, we need to realize that no one could be a formally educated Pharisee or rabbi of that school and not be married. In Paul’s day, this was regarded as, well, very peculiar.

This, coupled with verse 8, makes it likely that Paul was a widower. He was almost certainly not the lifelong celibate that Vatican writers would like you to believe. Thus, he is recommending that widowed believers not remarry and also that single believers remain single as a suggestion, not a commandment.

**Dangerous times!**

There is no doubt that, especially in that time, it was very dangerous to be a Believer. If one were single, one could serve the Lord a bit more wholeheartedly; and not worry about the spouse or children being killed or
tortured for your actions. Some of what Paul wrote should be read in that context.

Additionally, Paul believed that the coming of the Lord in the air was very near. He may have felt that it would be more important to focus totally on serving the Lord and less on raising a family since the end was so close.

Today, we realize he was mistaken in this. Thus, his advice about being single can hardly be taken either as a commandment (which he explicitly denies) for either the ministerial state or for the lay state. It is hardly a ringing endorsement of mandatory celibacy for the clergy.

Yes, Paul DID establish an order of widows (1Tim. 5) that some Catholic writers have said was the first order of nuns. However, these were widows, not virgins. They came together for spiritual and economic solidarity. We must remember that in that culture, it was very economically hard for most widows to get by unless they were independently wealthy.

It also seemed to be requirement that they should only be older women (1Tim. 5:11). This is hardly the same thing as 18-year-old girls entering a nunnery!

Understand, there is nothing wrong Biblically with remaining single or not remarrying if you are widowed! This is a powerful and honorable gifting within the congregation of Believers. It might well free you up to do much for the Lord. However, it needs to be a calling which comes from within, not imposed by hierarchy.

**Doctrines of Devils?**

Against these rather tenuous proof-texts, we can offer some contrary verses.

Gen. 2:18 And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.

1Tim. 3:2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour... (See also Titus 1:6)

1Tim. 4:1,3a Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils... Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats...

Obviously the Genesis passage is a broad rule for humanity. Still, it seems to indicate YHWH feels that the married state is healthier for folks in general. The solitary life is “not good”.

However, the Timothy and Titus passages are harder to ignore. They relate directly to Paul’s pastoral guidelines for clergy. If celibacy is required, then how can a bishop have a wife? Not one bishop in Rome fulfills that rule!

The passage about “forbidding to marry” is also troublesome. Some Catholics I have corresponded with have said that the Vatican forbids no one to marry. That is not really true. Priests, brothers and nuns are forbidden to marry. They cannot marry without being “laicized” and getting special permission for Rome. They must give up their vocation to the religious life after that.

If any practical sense, it cannot be denied that such people are forbidden to marry. They are given a choice to either (a) serve the Almighty in the way they believe they are called or (b) leave their calling behind to marry.

The Human and Social Impact

The celibacy rule has created crises in the Vatican in recent years. The most obvious is the drastic drop in vocations.

Priests are rapidly becoming an endangered species. I recently learned that the Catholic seminary where I got my master’s now only has three men in its program! That is ten percent of the number enrolled in 1980! Many parishes go begging, and nuns or “permanent deacons” (who are allowed to be married) must do most of the pastoral tasks.

It would appear that fewer and fewer people in the Roman church are being gifted by the Holy spirit with celibacy. Often, even those in the priesthood are not as celibate as one might think. In a recent study by an ordained Catholic priest now in practice as a psychotherapist, it was revealed that about 20% of US priests are in “stable, sexual relationship” with women. Another 8-10% are involved in more casual sexual contacts such as dating and/or one-night stands.

Additionally, between 18-22 and 50% (depending on the study) of US priests are involved in homosexual relationship! That means probably less than half of US priests (speaking charitably) are not even approaching the ideals of celibacy. What is the point of an unscriptural rule that causes most to stumble into sin?

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3 Ibid., p. 107.
A Godly Impulse Twisted?

A more sinister consequence of the celibacy requirement is that it forces the sexual drives of many of these unfortunate people into very strange directions. In the past decade, account after account has emerged of priests sexually molesting children under their care. For a long time, the church attempted to cover this up.

Whether or not there are more pedophiles among Catholic clergy than other denominations is not easy to determine. An area where these is some statistical evidence is in the area of HIV infections. An AP report from the KANSAS CITY STAR, 1/30/2000 indicated that Catholic priests are dying of AIDS at a significantly elevated rate. Their death is four times higher than for men in the general population.

According to Catholic clergy who are ministering to these AIDS patients, the vast majority of them contracted the disease from homosexual acts. According to the article, six out of ten priests who responded to a confidential survey said that they knew a priest who had died of AIDS-related illness. One in three knew a priest living with the AIDS virus.

Another tragic side effect of this enforced celibacy is that in 23 countries the priests who rule over them abuse many nuns sexually. They are either being pressured for sexual favors or outright raped by the priests. It is becoming a significant scandal.

All of this comes from ignoring the clear counsel of scripture that it is not good for man to be alone. To be sure, there is calling to a single state, but it cannot be imposed from without by law or decree. And it cannot be practiced without the anointing of the Holy Spirit, something that is evidently sadly lacking in many of these Roman clergy.

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4 The majority were from Africa, but also Brazil, the US, India, Italy, Ireland and the Philippines.
