



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

Pleasing the Lord

*Readings: Deuteronomy 18: 15-20, Ps 94, 1 Corinthians 7: 32-35,
Mark 1: 21-28*

‘An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord’s affairs, all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord. A married man has to bother about the world’s affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife.’

As one of those rare birds, a Latin West Catholic priest with a wife, by the gracious and generous dispensation of the Holy Father, it seemed to me that this morning’s Pauline text is a Scripture driven opportunity to look at the Church’s practice in this whole area of clerical discipline.

Since converting a dozen years ago I have, as you know, spent the majority of that time enjoying the glorious liberty of the laity and hearing frequent conversations about clerical celibacy and the possibility of clerical marriage. Some have been firmly opposed to married clergy.

My dear late friend and encourager, Rachel John, once said to me, of a convert priest whose wife was about to have a baby, ‘You do realise Robbie that he is ACTIVELY married!’ I explained gently that this came with the territory.

Others have been, in various degrees, enthusiastic at the prospect of married clergy which, they believe, will at a stroke solve the vocations crisis and remove the problems of clerical abuse.

Let me put my cards on the table.

I resisted the call to ordination as a Catholic priest for eight years because I did not feel it right to go forward into a brotherhood that offered the costly sacrifice and charism of celibacy without the direct call and encouragement of the authority of Christ's Church. I am grateful that this was generously and firmly given. As part of my submission I had to tender letters of support from those who could speak for the solidity of our marriage. My wife had to give her wholehearted consent and commitment. We were both grateful for the Church's concern and thoroughness. I had to promise that if Sara died before me I would become celibate. I could not remarry.

Now to the Scripture...

There are several things to be said here. Paul himself lives in a mixed economy. He is not married. Peter, the first Pope is. We know that because Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. Paul is also writing to the church in Corinth, a place that was a byword for sexual licence. The term, 'A Corinthian girl' was the ancient equivalent of 'an Essex girl' only worse. So he will have come across a lot of high maintenance girls there. Paul also spoke from an understanding that Christ would return soon and the role of a missionary was urgent and wide ranging with no time for a settled community life.

Knowing all these things, the Latin Church, in her wisdom, opted for the celibate model of priesthood. It is a discipline NOT a doctrine and the Church could change it at any time as she sees the needs of the overall economy of her ministry and mission.

The virtues and charism of celibacy does offer a full commitment to the Bride of Christ, the Church. For some men it is not a great sacrifice, for others it is massive, to put away thought of personal family and companionship for the wider family of the parish and deanery. There is a single-mindedness, not without temptation, that allows a man to be utterly at the disposal of the mission.

There has been much loose talk in recent years of celibacy being a provoker of sexual misconduct or abuse. This seems to me both deeply insulting and untrue. Institutional abuse is not the monopoly of single men nor is it the monopoly of the Catholic Church and we do well to nail such assertions as the lies they are.

The Church could, if she wished, introduce married priests as normative, as in Eastern Orthodoxy. But she would have to consider many things.

Let me list a few...

How would the bishop move his priests so freely when the wife might have a local job and children in schools?

What would the parish do if the priest got divorced?

How would the parish manage to support the priest, his wife and eight children in the presbytery?

How would the parish cope with a priest whose wife did not attend mass and did not like parishioners in the presbytery?

Married clergy is not a solution just a different set of problems and opportunities.

In Eastern Orthodoxy a man must marry before he is ordained or remain celibate. The same is true of Eastern Catholic churches. He will marry a woman who has a vocation to be a priest's wife and she will take it on knowing it to be a life of poverty and persecution.

A married man will never be a bishop and he will stay in his parish for good. The priest's wife and family become a part of that ministry.

There are, then, very different models of ministry across the church. There is no right or wrong in this, indeed in some smaller parts of the Catholic communion married priests are familiar.

But for the future of the Latin Church it would seem to be unlikely that the current discipline will change and nor, given the seismic economic, cultural and mission implications would it, in my humble opinion and St. Paul's, be wise to change its normative practice of clerical celibacy.

For my part and those like me who, with their faithful and committed wives, have been granted the extraordinary privilege of dispensation and

participation in the sacred ministry, we will do our best to hold the fort until the next generation of young priests come over the horizon. In the meantime give thanks for the sacrifice of the men who have served you with their lives and whose family you are.

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