



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

About priestly celibacy

*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. But a married man has to bother about the world's affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife....'

Good old St. Paul. Now you will be wondering what I am going to say next.

As a man who is married to the mother of his children this makes me increasingly unusual. As a husband who is also a Catholic priest this puts me in a niche market. In consequence I find that I get drawn into a lot of conversations about priestly celibacy and the prospects of a married priesthood. It is assumed that I am in favour of the latter and opposed to the former. In fact my only interest is in the teaching of the Church. So let's have a look at that shall we.

The first thing to note is that clerical celibacy is a discipline not a doctrine. In other words it is there for the considered good of the divine economy of the Church. But, not being a doctrine, it could be changed at

any time. The history of clerical celibacy is long and complicated. St. Peter was a married man. St. Paul insists that a bishop be the husband of only one wife etc. For most of the Church celibacy became the norm for the episcopate and it has been mandatory for the priests of the Latin Church (us) for nigh on a millennium. To this day some parts of the Catholic Church in the East have married priests and, in our own time, in the Latin West, the Papacy has graciously granted dispensation from celibacy for married priests who have converted from Protestantism – otherwise I would not be standing before you with the extraordinary privilege of preaching to you and offering the Mass. There is talk of Pope Francis using the 2019 South American Synod to push for the discretionary ordination of married *virī probati* (tried and trusted older men) to ease the vocations' crisis. So it is a hot topic.

When I was put forward for ordination, something I had agonised about for eight years after my conversion out of respect for my celibate brethren, I had to provide Rome with, among many other documents, a letter promising that, if I were widowed, I would not seek to remarry and that, dispensation notwithstanding, I accepted and affirmed the celibacy of the priesthood as normative. I did this without hesitation and now I will tell you why.

There is a motif running through much of the current debate that says, 'Having married priests would solve *the problem*.' This is usually a direct reference to the abuse scandal. This is a transparent nonsense. The abuse scandal (across the denominations) has its origin in the liberalising acceptance for training of men with disordered sexuality – so much so that many good men left the seminaries. It would be as offensive as it is

absurd to suggest that a celibate is more likely to be a pervert than a married man. I have been around long enough to nail that lie.

The other implication is that, *pace* Pope Francis, it would solve the vocations' crisis. My contention, as someone who has experienced both economies, is that it solves very little. It simply raises a different set of problems. Let me run you through a few of them.

In my own Anglican seminary I trained with some 45 men. Of the 75% who were not homosexual most of the rest were married or went on to marry. Of those some eight had marriages that did not work out with often grave consequences for the places in which they served. Even among those marriages that went the distance there was a wide variety of pastoral response. Some wives did not go to church. Some resented living in a house which was an ever open door to the parish etc. etc. Of the remaining quarter there were and are some remarkable wives who have faithfully added much to the ministry of their menfolk. In short – when it works it is brilliant, when it doesn't, it's disastrous.

Let us imagine then that you have struck lucky with your new young married Parish priest. The next question is how you are going to fund and support him, his wife and, eventually, being a faithful Catholic, their ten children. And how you will cope with the fact that he might not have as much time for you as you hoped. The bishop has problems too because he cannot move his priests without considering the wife's job or the children's schooling. I have seen heroic Anglican clergy families do all this and serve mightily – but it is rare and it is a wholly different economy. So be careful what you wish for.

The other arguments centre on celibacy itself and on one particular aspect –sex. We are conditioned, in this hyper-sexualised, decadent economy to assume that if people are not having sex there is something wrong with them and they cannot be happy. Brothers and sisters it will come as no surprise to you when I tell you that the overwhelming majority of people for the overwhelming majority of their lives are not having sex and the popular newspapers and magazines are shot through with the misery of those who are doing it in circumstances the Bible does not recommend! Sex does not equal happiness.

Celibacy, truly offered, can be a very beautiful thing. It is, at its highest intention, not a denial of man but an affirmation of God. It is a gift to the family of faith of a fatherhood of the priestly office, not of the flesh but of the spirit. It can be a liberation in the service of the Almighty. I cannot imagine myself, with the most faithful wife and three children, putting in the long heroic years in one of the most dangerous parts of the world that Fr. Ciaran has.

Whatever happens in the future in the disciplines of the Church, let us thank God for the beautiful gift of the offering of our priests' celibacy and honour it with filial affection. They have sacrificed intimate companionship and children that the greater Church may be that responsive and loving wife and we, the fruit of his ministry, his fond and faithful children.