



*Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem ©  
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## **Chancellor's Update**

### **I have drawn you as my lot**

There is continuing speculation in Rome about the possibility that Pope Francis may decide to make some change in the discipline of priestly celibacy. As a contribution to the discussion, we publish two texts, one from *Salt of the Earth*, a book published in 1997 by Ignatius Press, the other an encyclical by Pope Paul VI in 1967, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* ("On Priestly Celibacy"). First, then-Cardinal Ratzinger addresses the tradition of celibacy for priests in Western Catholicism. The catalyst for his exposition is German interviewer Peter Seewald:

**Peter Seewald: Curiously, nothing enrages people more than the question of celibacy, even though it concerns directly only a tiny fraction of the people in the Church. Why is there celibacy?**

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: It arises from a saying of Christ. There are, Christ says, those who give up marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and bear testimony to the kingdom of heaven with their whole existence. Very early on the Church came to the conviction that to be a priest means to give this testimony to the kingdom of heaven. In this regard, it could fall back analogously to an Old Testament parallel of another nature. Israel marches into the land. Each of the eleven tribes gets its land, its territory. Only the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe, doesn't get an inheritance; its inheritance is God alone. This means in practical terms that its members live on the cult offerings and not, like the other tribes, from the cultivation of land. The essential point is that they have no property. In Psalm 16 we read, You are my assigned portion; I have drawn you as my lot; God is my land. This figure, that is, the fact that in the Old Testament the priestly tribe is landless and, as it were, lives on God - and thereby also really bears witness to him - was later translated, on the basis of Jesus' words, to this: The land where the priest lives is God.

We have such difficulty understanding this renunciation today because the relationship to marriage and children has clearly shifted. To have to die without children was once synonymous with useless life: the echoes of my own life die away, and I am completely dead. If I have children, then I continue to live in them; it's a sort of immortality through posterity. For this reason the ultimate condition of life is to have posterity and thereby to remain in the land of the living.

The renunciation of marriage and family is thus to be understood in terms of this vision: I renounce what, humanly speaking, is not only the most normal but also the most important thing. I forego bringing forth further life on the tree of life, and I live in the faith that my land is really God - and so I make it easier for others, also, to believe that there is a kingdom of heaven. I bear witness to Jesus Christ, to the gospel, not only with words, but also with this specific mode of existence, and I place my life in this form at His disposal.

In this sense, celibacy has a Christological and an apostolic meaning at the same time. The point is not simply to save time - so I then have a little bit more time at my disposal because I am not a father of a family. That would be too primitive and pragmatic a way to see things. The

point is really an existence that stakes everything on God and leaves out precisely the one thing that normally makes a human existence fulfilled with a promising future.

**Seewald: On the other hand, it's certainly not a dogma. Couldn't the question perhaps be negotiated one day in the direction of a free choice between a celibate and a non-celibate form of life?**

Cardinal Ratzinger: No, it's certainly, not a dogma. It is an accustomed way of life that evolved very early in the Church on good biblical grounds. Recent studies show that celibacy goes back much farther than the usually acknowledged canonical sources would indicate, back to the second century. In the East, too, it was much more widespread than we have been able to realize up until now. In the East it isn't until the 7th century that there is a parting of the ways. Today as before, monasticism in the East is still the foundation that sustains the priesthood and the hierarchy. In that sense, celibacy also has a very major significance in the East.

It is not a dogma. It is a form of life that has grown up in the Church and that naturally always brings with it the danger of a fall. When one aims so high, there are failures.

I think that what provokes people today against celibacy is that they see how many priests really aren't inwardly in agreement with it and either live it hypocritically, badly, not at all, or only live it in a tortured way. So people say . . .

**Seewald: It ruins them . . .**

Cardinal Ratzinger: The poorer an age is in faith, the more frequent the falls. This robs celibacy of its credibility and obscures the real point of it.

People need to get straight in their minds that times of crisis for celibacy are always times of crisis for marriage as well. For, as a matter of fact, today we are experiencing not only violations of celibacy; marriage itself is becoming increasingly fragile as the basis of our society. In the legislation of Western nations we see how it is increasingly placed on the same level as other forms and is thereby largely "dissolved" as a legal form. Nor is the hard work needed really to live marriage negligible.

Put in practical terms, after the abolition of celibacy we would only have a different kind of problem with divorced priests. That is not unknown in the Protestant Churches.

In this sense, we see, of course, that the lofty forms of human existence involve great risks.

The conclusion that I would draw from this, however, is not that we should now say, "We can't do it anymore," but that we must learn again to believe. And that we must also be even more careful in the selection of candidates for the priesthood. The point is that someone ought really to accept it freely and not say, well now, I would like to become a priest, so I'll put up with this. Or: Well then, I'm not interested in girls anyway, so I'll go along with celibacy. That is not a basis to start from. The candidate for the priesthood has to recognize the faith as a force in his life, and he must know that he can live celibacy only in faith. Then celibacy can also become again a testimony that says something to people and that also gives them the courage to marry. The two institutions are interconnected. If fidelity in the one is no longer possible, the other no longer exists: one fidelity sustains the other. (Inside The Vatican, December, 2017 p 28-29)

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