

MARRIED CATHOLIC PRIESTS – why not?

One of my favourite priest/writers these days is my friend, Fr. Dwight Longenecker. We are happy to present his unique perspective on an issue which continues to percolate, especially as a growing number of former Anglican priests, like Fr Dwight, are coming into the full communion of the Church and being ordained to serve the Anglican Ordinariate. For more works by Fr Dwight check 'Catholics online'.

Again today I had a conversation which has been repeated numerous times: "Father, you are so good with the children, and you understand marriage first hand. Don't you think the church should allow priests to marry?"

First of all there are some distinctions to be made. The first question is, "May priests marry?" The second is "May married men be ordained?" The first is very unlikely to happen because the Church continues to uphold the fine and ancient tradition of priestly celibacy and a priest has taken a vow of celibacy which is life long and cannot be broken. The second question is more interesting: "May married men be ordained?"

The Eastern Orthodox discipline is that married men may be ordained, but priests may not marry. In other words, if you're already married you may be considered for ordination, but if you're an unmarried priest you may not marry. This would seem to be in accord with St Paul's instructions to single men that they "remain as he is" (I Cor. 7.25-27) and his instructions to Timothy on the other hand, that bishops and deacons should be the husband of one wife.(I Tim. 3) That is to say men who are already married to only one woman (he forbids polygamy) may be considered worthy of ordination.

It is the discipline of the Western Church that clerics are celibate, but it is a discipline which could be changed. Paul himself says in I Cor. 7.25 that his opinion that the unmarried remain so is not mandated from the Lord, and implies that it could be changed. Should it be changed? Should we allow married men to be ordained?

It would certainly seem to solve a lot of problems, not only in the West where, arguably, the mandatory vow of celibacy is one of the greatest deterrents to increased vocations, but it would also be a great help in Africa where celibacy is culturally unheard of. It would, arguably, also solve some problems of the modern priesthood in the West. So many of

our priests are isolated and alone and a huge number of problems surround the men who struggle with celibacy. So, is married priests the answer?

Not necessarily. Having married priests would certainly help the vocations crisis, and they may relate better to married people etc. However, believing that married priests are the answer assumes that they are mature, happily married men. Errr, I'm afraid marriage does not automatically make a man mature, self giving and happy. In my experience of married clergy in both the Evangelical Churches and the Anglican Church it is not the magic bullet. Having married clergy will not necessarily solve the vocations crisis, nor will it necessarily improve the priestly ministry, and it certainly won't be the solution to the priestly sex abuse problem.

Remember married men are not perfect. Married clergymen are workaholics. Married clergymen are immature. Married clergymen have affairs. Married clergymen have drink problems. Married clergymen struggle with porn and same sex attraction and abuse children. When a clergy marriage breaks down it is usually disastrous and scandalous and the hurt and pain ripple right through the whole church. I don't mean to paint a horrible picture of married clergy--just reminding people that it's not all quite as happy and wonderful as they seem to think.

There are other practical problems. Catholics say they want married clergy, but do they want to pay for them? I can get by because I work two jobs--parish priest and school chaplain. In addition to this I speak and write and Mrs Longenecker works. Not all married priests and their families can do this. Furthermore, remember that a married priest and his wife will be living by all the teachings of the Catholic Church. If they're young and fertile they will have a large family. Do Catholics really want to provide a rectory and the income for a family of 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 or 12? It's not really cheaper by the dozen.

I think the only movement there may be on this in the future is that the church may decide to ordain some older, married deacons. But the faithful should think it through carefully. Yes, there are problems with celibacy for priests.

Believe me, there will be equal or greater problems if we have married clergy.