

## Jesus and the Celibate Priesthood

### Introduction

1. Most Christians agree that Jesus is a Priestly Messiah (cf. Hebrews 8-10)
2. However, strong disagreement exists about if Jesus instituted a *ministerial* priesthood
  - a. The disciples are never explicitly called “priests” (Greek *hiereus*)
  - b. Protestant Reformers rejected the idea of a ministerial priesthood
  - c. Protestants have almost universally rejected the idea of a *celibate* priesthood
  - d. Widespread belief that priestly celibacy is a later “medieval” invention
3. Major Questions:
  - a. Did Jesus Institute a New Priesthood?
  - b. Did Jesus envision a Celibate Priesthood?
  - c. The Key: the *Jewish roots* of Jesus’ words and deeds

### 1. Jesus and the Priestly Hierarchy of his Disciples<sup>1</sup>

#### The Old Covenant Priesthood at Mount Sinai

And [the LORD] said to *Moses*, “Come up to the LORD, *you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship afar off*. Moses alone shall come near to the LORD; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him. And he [Moses] rose early in the morning, and built *an altar* at the foot of the mountain, and *twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel*. And he sent *young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD*. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of all the people... And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people, and said, “Behold, *the blood of the covenant* which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” *Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.* (Exodus 24:1-11)

#### Jesus and the Priestly Hierarchy of His Disciples:

##### Old Covenant Priesthood

Moses  
 The 1: the High Priest, Aaron  
 The 3: Aaron, Nadab, Abihu  
 The 12: Twelve Pillars/“Young Men”  
 of the Twelve Tribes  
 The 70: Elders of Israel/the Sanhedrin

(Exod 24:1-11)

##### Jesus and His Disciples

Jesus  
 The 1: Peter, chief of the Apostles  
 The 3: Peter, James, and John  
 The 12: Twelve Apostles  
 of the Twelve Tribes  
 The 70: Appointed and Sent Out

(Matt 16:17-19; Mark 3:13-16; Luke 10:1-20)

---

<sup>1</sup> See Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 53-147.

## **Jesus and the Celibate Priesthood**

### **2. The Jewish Roots of Priestly Celibacy**

#### **Jesus, the Priests in the Temple, and the Bread of the Presence**

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck ears of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” He said to them, “*Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the Bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the Temple is here. And if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.*” (Matt 12:1-8)

#### **Sexual Abstinence and the Old Testament Priesthood**

[David said]: “Now, then, what have you at hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.” And the priest answered David, “*I have no common bread at hand, but there is holy bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women.*” And David answered the priest, “Of a truth women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men are holy, even when it is a common journey; how much more today will their vessels be holy? *So the priest gave him the holy bread; for there was no bread there but the Bread of the Presence...* (1 Samuel 21:3-6)

#### **Jesus’ ‘Cleanses’ the Temple**

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple. *And he taught, and said to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the Gentiles’ [Isaiah 56:7]? But you have made it a ‘den of robbers’.*” And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching. (Mark 11:15-18)

#### **Isaiah’s Prophecy: a New Temple and a New Priesthood**

Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed... Let not *the foreigner* who has joined himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and let not *the eunuch* say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” For thus says the LORD: “*To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.* (Isaiah 56:1-8)

## **Jesus and the Celibate Priesthood**

### **Jesus' Call to Celibacy: 'Eunuchs' for the Sake of the Kingdom?**

The disciples said to [Jesus], "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given. For there are *eunuchs* who have been so from birth, and there are *eunuchs* who have been made eunuchs by men, and *there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.*" (Matt 19:12)

### **The Catechism on Jesus' Call to Celibacy**

*From the very beginning of the Church there have been men and women who have renounced the great good of marriage to follow the Lamb wherever he goes... Christ himself has invited certain persons to follow him in this way of life, of which he remains the model: "For... there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it."* (CCC 1618)

## **3. The Celibacy of the Apostles<sup>2</sup>**

### **What about Peter's Mother-in-Law?**

Now Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him of her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them. (Mark 1:30-31)

1. Why aren't the wives of the other apostles mentioned in the New Testament?
2. Jerome: suggests Peter was a widower (*Against Jovinian* 1.26)

### **What about St. Paul's Right to Travel with a "Wife"?**

This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have a right to our food and drink? *Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brethren of the Lord and Cephas?* Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? (1 Corinthians 9:3-7; RSV translation)

1. Original Greek: "the right to be accompanied by a *sister woman*" (*adelphēn gynaika*)
2. Paul is talking about a "sister woman"; i.e., a Christian woman—not his wife!
3. Paul would never have had to defend his right *to travel with his own wife!*

### **Jesus' Practice of Traveling with Celibate Female Disciples**

[Jesus] went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news... And the Twelve were with him, *and also some women* (Greek *gynaiques*)... Mary, called Magdalene... and Joanna, the wife of Chuza... and Susanna, and *many others, who provided for them out of their means.* (Luke 8:1-3)

---

<sup>2</sup> See Christian Cochini, S.J., *The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy* (trans. Nelly Marans; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 65-83, who shows that many Fathers believed most apostles were unmarried (Jerome, Augustine, Tertullian). However, even Church fathers who thought the apostles *were* married (Clement of Alexandria, Epiphanius, Basil of Caesarea) were *unanimous* about the fact that they lived in complete abstinence after answering the call to be apostles.

## Jesus and the Celibate Priesthood

### St. Jerome: The Celibacy of the Apostles

But if, in order to show that all the Apostles had wives, he meets us with the words “Have we no right to lead about women or wives” (for *γυνή* in Greek has both meanings) “even as the rest of the apostles, and Cephas, and the brethren of the Lord?” (1 Cor 9:3) let him add what is found in the Greek copies, “Have we no right to lead about women that are sisters, or wives?” *This makes it clear that the writer referred to other holy women, who, in accordance with Jewish custom, ministered to their teachers of their substance, as we read was the practice with even our Lord himself.* (Jerome, *Against Jovinian* 1.26; trans. NPNF2, 6.365)<sup>3</sup>

### The 144,000 Celibate Priests in Revelation

*Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had their name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.* And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth. *It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and for the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless.* (Revelation 14:1-5)

### The Catechism on Priestly Celibacy

All the ordained ministers of the Latin Church, with the exception of permanent deacons, are normally chosen from among men of faith who live a celibate life and who intend to remain *celibate* “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” [Matt 19:12]. Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to the “affairs of the Lord” [1 Cor 7:32] they give themselves entirely to God and to men. Celibacy is a sign of this new life to the service of which the Church’s minister is consecrated; accepted with a joyous heart celibacy radiantly proclaims the Reign of God. In the Eastern Churches a different discipline has been in force for many centuries: while bishops are chosen solely from among celibates, married men can be ordained as deacons and priests. This practice has long been considered legitimate; these priests exercise a fruitful ministry within their communities. Moreover, priestly celibacy is held in great honor in the Eastern Churches and many priests have freely chosen it for the sake of the Kingdom of God. In the East as in the West a man who has already received the Sacrament of Holy Orders can no longer marry. (CCC 1579-80)

---

<sup>3</sup> For a similar view, see St. Augustine: “*St. Paul argues explicitly that faithful women, possessing the goods of this world, went along with the apostles and ministered to them from their own supplies that the servants of God might lack none of those commodities which constitute the necessities of life....* Certain persons, not understanding this passage, have interpreted it as “wife.” The obscurity of the Greek word deceived them, since, in Greek, the same word is used for wife and woman. Yet the apostle has placed the words in such a way that people should not be deceived, since he says not merely “a woman” but “a sister woman,” and not “to take in marriage” but “to take about.” (St. Augustine, *The Work of Monks* 2, in Bray, *1-2 Corinthians*, 80-81)