

the Christian priesthood. To speak about it as a secondary reality is hurtful to all the priests of the world. Deep down I am persuaded that relativizing the law of priestly celibacy is tantamount to reducing the priesthood to a simple office. Now, the priesthood is not an office but a state of life. Priesthood in the first place is not doing; it is being.

Jesus Christ is priest. His whole being is priestly, in other words, given, handed over, and offered. Before he came, priests offered animals as a sacrifice to God. He revealed to us the fact that the true priest offers himself as a sacrifice. To be a priest is to enter ontologically into this offering of self to the Father for the Church that Jesus exemplified throughout his life. It is to adopt the sacrifice of the Cross as the form of one's whole life. The priesthood is an ontological participation in Christ's self-deprivation in this way. This gift takes the form of a spousal sacrifice. Christ is truly the Bridegroom of the Church. The ordained minister sacramentally represents Christ the Priest. The sacramental character configures him to Christ the Bridegroom. The priest is called to make of himself a complete, unlimited gift. He makes Christ the Bridegroom present sacramentally. Celibacy manifests this spousal gift; it is the concrete and vital sign of it. Celibacy is the seal of the Cross on our lives as priests. It is a cry of the priestly soul that proclaims its love for the Father and the gift of self to the Church. The wish to relativize celibacy amounts to disdain for this radical gift that so many faithful priests have lived out since their ordination.

By his celibacy, a priest renounces the human fulfillment of his ability to be a spouse and father according to the flesh. Out of love, he chooses to give that up in order to live exclusively as the spouse of the Church, offered entirely to the Father. I wish to proclaim with many of my brother priests the profound suffering that disdain for priestly celibacy causes me! This treasure cannot be relativized. Celibacy is the sign and the instrument of our entrance into the priestly being of Jesus. It takes on a value that we could describe analogously as sacramental. In 1992, John Paul II explained this idea in his apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*:

But the will of the Church [with regard to priestly celibacy] finds its ultimate motivation in the link between celibacy and sacred ordination, which configures the priest to Jesus Christ the head and spouse

of the Church. The Church, as the spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and spouse loved her. Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self in and with Christ to his Church and expresses the priest's service to the Church in and with the Lord.⁶

With this magisterial statement, Saint John Paul II expressed the doctrine of Vatican Council II about the priesthood. He affirms authoritatively that priestly celibacy is not a mere ecclesiastical discipline, but a manifestation of the sacramental representation of Christ the Priest. This document makes it difficult to derogate from the law of priestly celibacy, even for a limited region. On the contrary, it paves the way for a rediscovery by the Eastern Churches of the profound and radical ontological suitability of celibacy for the priestly state.

In 2007, in his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that priestly celibacy

expresses in a special way the dedication which conforms [the priest] to Christ and his exclusive offering of himself for the Kingdom of God. The fact that Christ himself, the eternal priest, lived his mission even to the sacrifice of the Cross in the state of virginity constitutes the sure point of reference for understanding the meaning of the tradition of the Latin Church. It is not sufficient to understand priestly celibacy in purely functional terms. Celibacy is really a special way of conforming oneself to Christ's own way of life. This choice has first and foremost a nuptial meaning; it is a profound identification with the heart of Christ the Bridegroom who gives his life for his Bride.⁷

If the priest manifests and signals to the world by his celibacy that he intends to marry the Church, what meaning can be assigned to the life of married priests? Would they be less dedicated to the Church? How could they live out the fullness of their responsibility as husbands and fathers of families if they are above all spouses of the Church and

⁶Pope Saint John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day (March 25, 1992), no. 29.

⁷Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission (February 22, 2007), no. 24.