



RESPONSE by Father Robbie Low to comments on his homily for the
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

Peter's Mother-in-Law

Readings: Job 7: 1-4, 6-7, Ps 146, 1 Corinthians 9: 16-119, 22-23, Mark 1: 29-39

In response to my Sermon on Peter's Mother-in-law (5th Sunday) re the celibacy of the clergy, I received a number of responses which were encouraging and positive. I also received, equally welcome, a detailed critique from a good friend whose theological judgement is both sound and learned. With permission I will share this with you.

Re the statement that 'the celibacy of the clergy is a discipline not a doctrine.'

My reader writes:

'Disciplines in the Church do not float free from doctrinal aspects. Fasting during Lent is a discipline but it is rooted in theological elements relating to sin, temptation, divine grace and other points. Likewise for celibacy. If this were merely disciplinary, without a doctrinal foundation, then there would be no reason for Christ not marrying (that He did not marry as a first-century rabbi was, I believe, unusual for the time) nor for Mary's continuing virginity after she gave birth to her Son. Also, there would be no rationale for the present discipline that if a priest or deacon

is widowed, he cannot then remarry. The fact that this rule applies testifies to there being a doctrinal reason behind it. The eleventh century formal prohibition simply regularised many earlier attempts to require either celibacy or perfect chastity within marriage, going back centuries.

The latitudinarian attitude of the East is an historic compromise (like their tolerance of divorce -- provided you don't divorce more than three times, or whatever arbitrary number they came up with). There is good historical evidence to show that in the early centuries, married clergy after their ordination lived as brother and sister with their spouses: in other words, conjugal relations ceased at that point. This was probably based on the ritual purity practices of the Mosaic priesthood, where such relations were forbidden when the priest was taking his turn at the sacrifices in the Temple at Jerusalem (think of the Baptist's father, Zachariah). The reason why bishops in the so-called Orthodox churches are celibate is simply because they are drawn from the ranks of the monks (who, of course, are vowed to celibacy in that capacity): it has nothing to do with some mystical appreciation of celibacy as somehow being more appropriate for the episcopal order.

All in all, then, I am not inclined to agree with the opinion that celibacy is more disciplinary than doctrinal.

By the way, your notes overlook one other possibility -- namely, that Peter was widowed before he became a disciple.'

My Response:

I am always grateful for comment and, where needed, correction.

My intention, in the sermon, was to defend the celibacy of the clergy as normative and suitable for the Gospel purpose of the Church. But I would not want to inadvertently mislead by over-simplification.

- 1) I fully accept the causal links between doctrine and discipline. To dispose of these or underplay them leads to the sort of uncertainty and chaos currently surrounding the latest publication from Rome on the nature of blessings for those in irregular relationships.
- 2) The Orthodox compromise is well put by my correspondent though it is also as much to do with avoiding nepotism in the hierarchy too.
- 3) The Orthodox marriage rule – ‘three strikes and you’re out’ is, to put it mildly, generous but not founded in any straightforward reading of Scripture.
- 4) I accept that Peter may have been a widower but that seems to me to be a ‘long shot’.
- 5) The abstaining from sexual activity before attending to Sacred matters is well attested in the Old Testament while marriage is still seen as normative in the priesthood with full conjugal relations outside of those specific sacral duties.

My thanks to all who contacted me and especially to my correspondent

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