

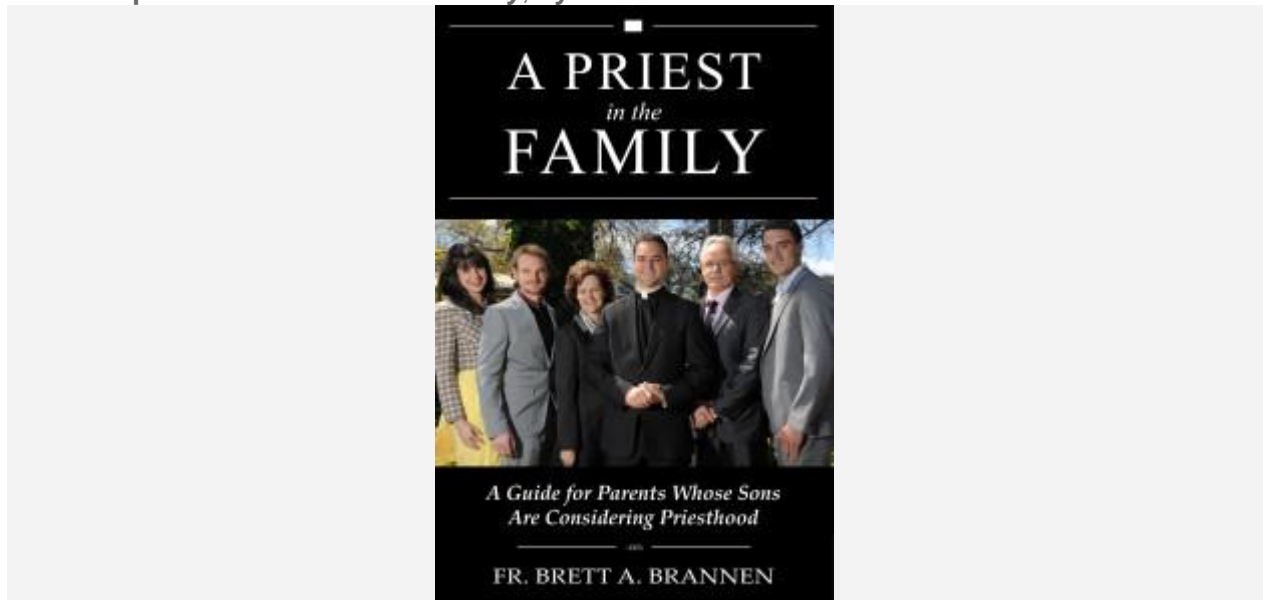
Family Feature

Why Celibacy?

In Religion Class, we have been exploring the various Catholic vocations to marriage, priesthood, and religious life. In this unit, the topic of celibacy is frequently addressed. Fr. Brett Brannen, the author of the book *A Priest in the Family*, explains the concept of celibacy rather well. Here is an excerpt from the book that offers several compelling insights about the practice of celibacy within the Church.

Why Celibacy?

An Excerpt from *A Priest in the Family*, by Fr. Brett Brannen



A Priest in the Family was written for parents who have some concerns about their son entering seminary.

I once heard the story of the Lotha tribe in Nagaland, India, a place that many Protestant missionaries had visited. They had all tried to convert the tribesmen to Christianity, but no one could convince the elderly chief to convert, and his decision was determinative for the others. Finally, in 1952, a Catholic priest went to this tribe and began to preach the Christian message, much as the Protestant missionaries had done before him. When the chief, Mothungo Ezung, learned that the priest was celibate—not married precisely to show the world that the Christian message about eternal life is true—he converted to the Catholic Faith immediately, taking the baptismal name Peter. The chief was impressed and inspired that these priests were willing to forgo something as valuable as marriage and children, because of Jesus Christ and his promise of eternal life. With the chief, 2600 people converted to Christianity, among four villages! The chief's grandson, Mhonchan Ezung, is a seminarian for the diocese of Metuchen, NJ today.

“In an age so steeped in sex and pleasure seeking materialism, should there not be somewhere on this planet those who joyously and generously offer their bodies as concrete

proof of their conviction of the supremacy of the spiritual over the material, and as a sign of love for Him who did not spare even His own Son for love of us?"

Jean Guitton, French Philosopher

The requirement of celibacy is one of the greatest sources of anxiety in a man who is discerning priesthood, so it is understandable why parents also would worry. We live in a sex-saturated society. Sex or sensuality is featured on our televisions, computers, billboards, and magazines. The message we receive from the media is very clear: no person can be happy and fulfilled unless they are having a lot of sex. This is simply not true. But if you speak a lie often enough, people begin to believe it. This is one of the reasons many people are skeptical about celibacy.

In the Roman Catholic Church, it is understood that when God calls a man to the priesthood, he is also calling him to apostolic celibacy—the state of being unmarried and thus abstaining from sexual relations for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Why is this? A veritable library of books has been written on the subject, and I cannot hope to present the rich history of celibacy in a few pages. So let me present five key concepts to help you understand celibacy from the Church's point of view. First, celibacy does not imply that sexual relations in marriage are impure—to the contrary! The Church has always upheld the beauty of marriage and family, often in spite of intense pressure by societies or governments to weaken or "broaden" this sacred institution. A respect for marriage goes hand-in-hand with respect for celibacy:

"Most Catholic people marry, and all Catholics are taught to venerate marriage as a holy institution—a sacrament, an action of God upon our souls; one of the holiest things we encounter in this life. In fact, it is precisely the holiness of marriage that makes celibacy precious; for only what is good and holy in itself can be given up for God as a sacrifice. Just as fasting presupposes the goodness of food, celibacy presupposes the goodness of marriage. To despise celibacy, therefore, is to undermine marriage itself—as the early Fathers pointed out." ([From Catholic.com](#))

Second, instead of committing to a single woman, a priest gives himself to every man, woman, and child. This is the practical aspect of celibacy. A priest does not go to work, earn a living, and return home to the demands of ordinary family life. Instead, he sacrifices the good of wife and children in order to be free to serve the parish. He is up early, not to feed his children breakfast, but to feed the people of God with the Eucharist. He is up late, not to pore over finances with his wife, but to review the parish budget with the finance council. St. Paul describes this well: "I have become all things to all men, so as to save at least some of them. All this I do for the sake of the Gospel (1Cor 9:22-23)."

Third, celibacy is firmly rooted in scripture and Church tradition. Jesus himself said that some people "have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of God. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it" (Mt. 19:12). Writing a few years after Jesus' resurrection, St. Paul also recommended celibacy, saying, "The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided" (1Cor7:27-34). This preference for priestly celibacy persisted in the early Church and quickly became the norm.

Fourth, Jesus was celibate. Jesus never married because that was not the plan of the Father for him. A priest is asked to be like Jesus as much as possible, and to imitate Jesus by giving himself completely as a gift to others. To understand this, we need to refer to a key theological concept found in scripture: throughout the New Testament, Jesus is described as the bridegroom and the Church as the bride. Now, because we understand that a priest is functioning *in persona Christi capitis* (in the person of Christ, the head of the Church), we can see that, like Jesus, a priest is already married—to the Church. At no time is this more clear than when a priest celebrates the Holy Mass. As the priest stands at the altar, saying, "This is my Body, given up for you," in essence he is

renewing Jesus' wedding vows to the Church. In this sense, the Mass is a profound act of marital intimacy. The priest's celibacy mirrors Jesus' celibacy, his exclusive love for his bride, the Church.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, celibacy reminds us of the reality of heaven. Jesus taught that there is no marriage in heaven between men and women (Mark 12:25). This is because heaven *is* a wedding feast—the eternal celebration of the union between Jesus and his bride, the Church. This heavenly marriage is the *real* marriage, the one that lasts forever.

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. *This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.* Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.” Ephesians 5: 31-33

I certainly realize that these are profound concepts, especially if you are considering them for the first time. You may be wondering how a man could forgo sex his whole life based on some *metaphors* from scripture. But these are no ordinary metaphors. To explain, I'm going to appeal to one of the most famous philosophical texts of all time, Plato's Allegory of the Cave.

The famous ancient philosopher Plato describes a cave in which people have lived their whole lives, chained facing the back wall. They see shadows on the wall caused by light entering from the mouth of the cave and they believe the shadows are real life because they cannot leave the cave or even turn around and see the light. When one person escapes the cave, he discovers the shadows are actually caused by real objects which he can now see in the light of the sun, but he cannot convince the others who remain in the cave of the truth of his discovery. The point is that there are eternal realities that are more profound and more real than earthly realities. Plato understood this, long before Christian revelation. But this is difficult for most people to accept.

Let's apply the Allegory of the Cave to marriage. In a sense, marriage is like a “shadow” of a more fundamental reality: heaven. In heaven, we will be united to God and each other for ever, in a union far deeper than the most sensual marital embrace. That is why in scripture, God uses the analogy of marriage, a reality we can understand, to help us imagine heaven, which is more difficult to understand. Thus celibacy—an absurdity to the world—is a radical sign that *heaven is real*. When a priest gives up marriage and responds to a call to celibacy, people know he's serious about the things above. He's willing to make a tremendous sacrifice on earth to help people look toward the reality of heaven.

Pope John Paul II, in his ground breaking work, *The Theology of the Body*, puts it this way: “All analogies are inadequate to describe our eschatological union with God in the Kingdom of Heaven. But of all analogies, the marital embrace is the least inadequate.”

“The spiritual children which the Lord gives each priest, the children he has baptized, the families he has blessed and helped on their way, the sick he has comforted, the young people he catechizes and helps to grow, the poor he assists... all these are the ‘Bride’ whom he rejoices to treat as his supreme and only love and to whom he is constantly faithful.”
Pope Francis, Chrism Mass, 2014

Even the infamous atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, certainly no friend of the Catholic Church, recognized the value of celibacy. He observed that celibacy signifies to the laity that the priest belongs to them equally—that there is no one person (e.g., a wife or child) who has a special right to his soul. Reflecting on the Protestant Reformation, Nietzsche wrote:

“Martin Luther gave back to the priest sexual intercourse with women; but three quarters of the reverence of which the common people, especially the women among the common people, are capable, rests on the faith that a person who is an exception at this point will be an exception in other respects as well... Luther, having given woman to the priest, had to take away from him auricular confession; that was right psychologically. With that development the Christian priesthood was fundamentally abolished, because his most profound utility had always been that he was a holy ear, a silent well, a grave for secrets.”
Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, 5.358

Sometimes married couples themselves have a profound understanding of celibacy because of their life circumstances. I knew of a seminarian who was approaching his diaconate ordination, the time when he would have to make his life-long promise of celibacy. He was very nervous. Though he had prayed long and hard, he was still not sure if he would be able to make this promise in tranquility of heart. Several times, he had mentioned his concerns to his father, a devout Catholic man and a wonderful father. Each time, his father had counseled him, “Well, just continue to pray about it and Jesus will guide you. He will give you the grace you need to do what He asks of you.” One day, the two were riding in a car together and the seminarian once again expressed his concern about celibacy, and the father replied with the same, solid advice. This time, the seminarian became angry and he shouted at his dad, “What do you know about celibacy? You are a married man. How can you know what I am dealing with?” The father pulled the car over to the side of the road and he turned it off. He said to his son, “Do you remember many years ago when your mother was in that terrible car accident? The seminarian replied, “Yes, of course. She almost died.” The father continued, “Since that time fifteen years ago, because of her injuries and the required medications, your mother and I have not been able to have sexual relations at all.” The young man was incredulous. He said, “Dad, I never knew that. I am so sorry. But how did you do it? You were just a young man yourself.” The father replied calmly, “I love your mother with a higher love than just the physical and I will love her and stay faithful to her until the day I die. Jesus gives me the grace to do what He asks of me.” The young man began to cry. He realized that his father’s advice came from a great understanding. Love and suffering are mystically related, and we are all called to that higher love which always involves suffering. Jesus always gives us the grace to do what He asks us to do. The young man was ordained a deacon, and he is a happy priest today.

Let me end this section with a practical illustration of the wisdom of celibacy, again from the perspective of a married man. A good friend of mine is a Methodist minister and a very holy, dedicated servant of God. He once told me this story:

“I was pastoring a very large church and really exerting myself to take care of so many people. One day, I left my house at 6:00 a.m. and never stopped the entire day. At around 7:30 that night, my wife called me on my cell phone and asked, ‘Are you going to come home and make love to me tonight? Or are you going to stay and make love to your church?’ I asked, ‘Is it that bad?’ She replied, ‘Yes.’”

This minister acknowledged that, although he loved his wife and children very much, he also admired and respected the discipline of celibacy in the Catholic priesthood. He understood why Jesus would recommend celibacy for his priests. A priest gives all his love to Jesus and his Church.

