

## **Celibate and Married Deacons**

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The Catholic Church has a long tradition of having both celibate and married clergy but few Catholics are aware of this. In the Eastern Catholic Churches priests and deacons may be chosen from among married men or single men. In the Western or Latin Church priests are normally chosen from among men who are called to celibacy and deacons from among both married and celibate men. Bishops are always single men.

Sometimes men who have been ministers in another Christian community and who have become Catholic are permitted to be ordained as Catholic priests. This custom goes back to the fourth century and questions about the status of clergy, ordained by schismatic bishops, who return to full communion with the Catholic Church. But there are only a few of such men in Australia and our own diocese.

Most Latin (Roman) Catholics have experienced celibate clergy, which is the norm for priests in our Church. They are sometimes confused by an encounter with married clergy. Sometimes this confusion leads to people incorrectly refer to the “married diaconate” instead of the permanent diaconate. The fact of being married clergy seems to them more distinctive than the fact that a man is a permanent deacon (or priest).

As the permanent ministry of deacon is open to and in fact has both celibate and married men it is not correct to call it the “married diaconate”.

The law of the Church, both east and west since at least the fifth century, is that married men may be ordained but an ordained man may not subsequently marry.

Men who have the gift of celibacy and who are called to the ministry of deacon, undertake to remain celibate for the rest of their lives. It is the same promise candidates for the priesthood make at their diaconal ordination. Such men must discern that the Spirit has given them the gift of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. Celibacy must be freely taken up as it can never be imposed.

In the Latin Church the law of priestly celibacy requires that only men who have the gift of celibacy may be chosen as potential priests. Seminarians must discern that they have the gift of celibacy before diaconal ordination takes place.

If the wife of a cleric dies normally he may not marry again. Exceptions may be made if the cleric has very young children.

Ordination precludes a man from marriage. Even if today the Latin Church changed its law and allowed bishops to choose from among married or single men for the priesthood no celibate priest could get married unless the law prohibiting remarriage for clergy and the law prohibiting ordained men marrying also changed.

For a previously married cleric, being widowed will bring with about a new life as a single man. The local church needs to demonstrate great compassion in helping a man adjust to this new life as a single man. Normally the bishop would appoint a mentor to assist the widowed deacon or priest through this period of transition.

Some people assume that a widowed deacon will or can become a priest. This is not normally the case. A deacon has been admitted to a distinct and permanent order and not a ministry on the way to or almost a priest. If such men automatically became priests it would undermine the intrinsic validity of a permanent ministry of deacons.

A second reason for not automatically ordaining widowed deacons to the priesthood is that it might create the impression that a wife is an impediment to priestly ordination. Marriage should not be seen as an impediment but as complimentary to the deacon's ministry. We should not devalue the sacrament of marriage by suggesting it is merely a brake on priestly ordination.

A third reason is that we should avoid under valuing the ministry of deacons by suggesting that the only real or worthwhile ordained ministry is that of the priest. It may create the impression that a deacon is "half" a priest or "almost" a priest.

The Council clearly wanted to express the belief of the Church that the ordained ministry was more than that of priest. The dominant theology prior to the Council was that priesthood was the pinnacle of Holy Orders.

The ministry of deacon was restored not because there was a shortage of priests but because there was an acute shortage of deacons! If we automatically made all permanent deacons priests we would be back to a pre-Vatican II situation in the ministry of Holy Orders.

It can happen that a bishop recommends that a deacon may be ordained a priest after his wife dies. The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Deacons (1998) states that this should always be the exception to the rule for the reasons outlined above.

The diaconate is a permanent ministry for celibate and married men. In Australia the majority of deacons are married men. Many Catholics may not be used to hearing clergy talk about their wife and children and what they are up to in their lives. They may be surprised to encounter us at the side of the rugby field cheering our son on, or at our daughter's concert and at parent teacher night at school.

One of the hopes that the Council had was that bringing the ordained ministry closer to the lives of other Catholics would enrich both the ordained ministry and the Church at large. The experience of a married clergy highlights the importance of the gift of celibate clergy and their total availability for ministry. At the same time the permanent ministry of deacons points to the necessity of the priesthood in communion with the ministry of the deacon and bishop. The Church is a Eucharistic community and we need priests to preside over our liturgy and the parish community.

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