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CELIBATE PRIESTS

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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There has been a good deal of discussion in the newspapers about the rule of celibacy which the Roman Catholic Church requires its priests to vow before their ordination. The New York Times reports the formation of an association of Roman Catholic priests in America to work for the repeal of this rule. It reports that in a questionnaire completed by 2,500 priests in the United States 90 per cent of them favoured making marriage optional for priests, which shows how widespread is the feeling against celibacy amongst priests of the Roman Catholic Church in America. And this feeling among Roman Catholic priests is not confined to America.

Moreover, there have been reports from time to time in the papers that some leading Roman Catholic priests have left the ministry and have married. This has disturbed some of the leaders. For example, an Australian Roman Catholic Archbishop described

such men as "Unfortunate priests who have been unfaithful to the undertaking to God to serve Him with chastity and obedience". This comment raises the question of whether God wishes to be served by vows of celibacy. It is well to remember that not all the ways men choose to serve God please Him. The prophet Isaiah speaking in God's name told the worshippers of his day that God abominated the way they worshipped Him and the reason was that the way they chose to serve Him was not according to the will of God (Isaiah I).

Our service of God must be based on the knowledge of God. That is to say,, it must be based on Revelation and this applies not only to the form our church services take, but also to the way we serve God in our daily living. Therefore we must read the Bible regularly ourselves, in order that God's Word might correct our thoughts, and the Bible should also be faithfully and carefully expounded on Sundays by the preacher.

Much of our church activity and much of our private activity needs this corrective, for unless we are conforming to the mind of God in what we do, we cannot be said to be serving God, and unless we serve Him truly, we will not receive at the end His "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord".

It cannot be said even within the Roman Church that the revealed will of God is that priests should always be celibate. The rule for celibacy in that church is only 800 years old. For the first one thousand years there was no such rule, and even nowadays it is not a universal rule, for the Roman Catholic Church allows many of its priests to be married, for example, all the priests in the uniate churches of the East, while only a few years ago Pius XII gave a dispensation to some Lutheran pastors to continue in their marriage state after they joined the Church of Rome and had been ordained to the priest-

hood. Thus the rule of celibacy cannot be said, and indeed is not said by Roman Catholics themselves, to be enjoined by the Word of God. It is a rule of the church, so that the statement of the Australian Archbishop that it is an undertaking to God would only be true if it could be shown that all the church's rules are the laws of God. Plainly the church cannot make whatever rules it likes for its priests, and still expect God to approve. It must keep within God's Word if its rules are to have God's sanction. To take an extreme imaginary example to make the point clear, if the church required all its priests to be blinded before ordination, would this have the approval of God just because it was made by the church? Sight is a wonderful gift of God intended to be enjoyed by all and God would not be served by our foregoing this gift. Why then is it said that God is served by a compulsory foregoing of His gift of marriage. God's Word is clear, which teaches that marriage is God's

creation and so is good, and is not to be rejected. (I Tim, 4:3-5).

In a recent sermon in St. Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Sydney the celibacy of priests was defended as a superior way of life and as an anticipation of the new heavenly life which will be ushered in with Christ's return. But it is not possible to give any biblical authority for this assertion. It is true that the New Testament says that in Heaven marriage will be superseded, but this is because the fellowship of heaven will be of such a deep and universal character that it will not need the aid of marriage and it will be free from the limitation which marriage necessarily involves with regard to the number of those with whom deep personal fellowship may be experienced. In heaven we will enjoy fellowship not with our spouse only, but with all God's people; nor will heavenly fellowship have any elements of a physical nature, for this will have been

superseded. It will be a spiritual fellowship. Even in marriage the physical is a handmaid to the personal, and it is this personal fellowship which is the real joy of marriage. Marriage is the crucible of fellowship and the sphere for its experience. But it is limiting in its range. In heaven this will be superseded by a surpassing fellowship, of which marriage is a type. In the Bible it is marriage, not celibacy, that is regarded as the anticipation of the Heavenly state. It is marriage which God uses to describe His relationship to His people. They are His bride. And it is the marriage feast which is used as the symbol for the heavenly fellowship and joy. This use of marriage as a metaphor and sign of God's relation to His people is because marriage is a relationship of fellowship, and God's purpose in creating man is that we should be in fellowship with each other and with Him. We will experience fellowship at the deepest and

the widest level in Heaven.

Of course, fellowship is not restricted to marriage and it may be entered into fully and truly without the bonds of marriage, and there are situations where marriage is plainly not part of God's will for His servant. And if called to this it will not prove to be a lesser way of life. Thus celibacy or marriage are alternatives; but what is objectionable is compulsory celibacy. When celibacy is chosen, it should be a personal choice, arising from God's will perceived in the circumstances of an individual's life. It should not be through the imposition of a universal rule. The statements have no basis when it is said that celibacy is God's will for His priests; or that it is a superior way of life, or an anticipation of heaven. None of these statements can be justified from Scripture.

The foregoing of God's gifts to satisfy the craving in our natural hearts for acetic-

ism, is God dishonouring; for God gives us His gifts to enjoy, not to forego, and thankfulness should be the attitude of the Christian as he receives the good gifts of God. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says "I know that there is nothing better for men than to rejoice and to do good so long as they live and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy good in all his labour is the gift of God" Eccles. 3:12,13. Thankfulness for God's good gifts is the keynote of Christian living. It expresses our sense of God's character and our faith in Him for the future. We ought to exercise ourselves in thankfulness every day. Thankfulness and asceticism cannot co-exist, that is why there is no place for asceticism in true Christian life. If God calls us to a way of life which does not involve entering into marriage, we will not miss any of God's blessings by following His call, for God is good. But it is a very different thing when a denomination makes celibacy compulsory before a man is

able to serve God in the ministry. In doing this it goes beyond the Word of God and obscures and distorts the gracious character of God and puts a stumblingblock in the way of those seeking to serve God.

Every action of a Christian should reflect the character of God. We must ask for God's help to do this. It is a prayer He will gladly and fully answer.

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