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P R O T E S T A N T

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FORBIDDING PRIESTS TO MARRY

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by  
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Many will have read in the paper last week the account about how a Roman Catholic priest in London was excommunicated when he got married twelve years ago. He has since been teaching in a Technical College. He and his wife now have three children and although lawfully married according to the law of England, the Roman Catholic church continues to maintain that their marriage is a mere pretence. His wife said in the paper "We did everything possible to have my husband's vows revoked. We appealed to the late Cardinal Godfrey of Westminster and even to the Pope but every time we were told it was not possible. I have fretted about it, for in the eyes of the Church we can never be regarded as husband and wife. I have been asked to put the children into homes so that my husband could be free to go back to the Church as a priest. Neither Edward nor I would ever do this." Her husband commented about his situation, he said "It happens to other priests. The point is that something you may decide when you are seventeen, as I was when I decided to enter the church, looks totally different when you are 40".

There are several comments that should be made about this attitude of the Roman Catholic church towards marriage. Firstly, and most importantly, it is directly opposite to the Scriptures which teach that marriage is an honourable way of life, and God's general intention for people of every class and calling. Thus the Epistle to the Hebrews states "Marriage is honourable in all". (Heb. 13:4) In 1 Corinthians 7 St. Paul makes clear that to get married or not to get married is a matter left free by God for everyone to decide for himself. Sometimes God calls a person to live a single life, others He calls to marriage. It is very wrong to interfere in this freedom which God has given to His children. It is wrong to impose conditions, over and above what God requires, if a person is to

fulfil God's calling to be a minister in the church. No-one, not even our church or denomination, has a right to impose rules on our consciences in matters which God has left free for His Spirit to direct each individual in. Indeed the Bible warns us in I Timothy 4 to be on our guard against those who in later times will forbid marriage. St. Paul's words are "For the Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils. .... bidding to abstain from marriage, and from certain kinds of food, although God has made these for the grateful enjoyment of those whom faith has enabled to recognize the truth. All is good that God has made and nothing is to be rejected, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is hallowed for our use through the word of God and prayer."

The next point to mention is that the Roman Catholic rule for clerical celibacy is not only contrary to the Bible, but also to the practice of the early church. It is wellknown that at the First General Council in the Fourth Century it was suggested that the clergy should be required to give up their marriage but that one of the most respectable members of the Council named Paphnutius earnestly entreated members of the Council "not to impose so heavy a yoke on ministers of religion". In this connection we should remember that the Bible tells us that all the apostles with one or two exceptions were accompanied on their missionary journeys by their wives. (1 Cor.9:5).

The third thing to note is that the Roman Catholic church is not consistent in its rule with regard to its clergy not being married. Thus in Eastern Europe to-day a great number of Roman Catholic priests are allowed to live in the marriage state with their wives, while of course in the Greek

Orthodox church it is the regular thing for parish clergy to be married. Then again quite recently Pope Pius XII allowed some Roman Catholic priests in Germany to continue to live in marriage with their wives. They had been converted to Roman Catholicism from Protestantism. This fact is referred to by Hans Kung, a famous Roman Catholic theologian at the recent Vatican Council in his book "The Council and Reunion" on page 263. Kung urges the modification of this Church law of celibacy for priests since as he states it is purely a church law and not derived directly from the Bible. This statement of Kung's that the celibacy of the clergy is church law raises the point forcibly as to what right has the church to impose this law as a matter of absolute obligation on those whom God is calling to the ministry; and to plunge into cruel infamy those who do not feel that they are called by God to obey it, as was done in this recent case in England. Of course, the rule against clerical marriage is widely ignored in the Church of Rome, even in those countries where it is the church law. Thus Dr. Amand de Mendieta, who was a wellknown Roman Catholic scholar and who for over 30 years was a monk in a famous French Abbey but who recently left it and joined the Church of England, states in his book "Canterbury and Rome", page 230, "It is neither human, wise, or even moral to impose celibacy by force upon all who receive the call to the priesthood. ... It seems to me a sadly evident truth that the regime of legal constraint has provoked and provokes grave scandals, many great sins and countless frustrations and complexes, and is still turning many priests into neurasthenics. We need not go back to the middle ages in the western church when the law was broken more often than it was observed, we need only glance at the situation of the secular clergy of the Roman Catholic church, both in the southern countries of Europe and in the

South American Republics. In those last countries the canon law forbidding clerical marriage is still theoretically in force but there exists in actual fact a more or less recognised system of concubinage at which the bishops tacitly connive."

Dr. Amand de Mendieta's conclusions were already anticipated by Augustine Theiner, a priest of the Roman Catholic church, who later became Prefect of the Vatican Archives under Pope Pius IX. In the 1845 edition of his book printed with imprimatur he stated in the preface that compulsory celibacy was a mistake from the very first and that in his book he had exposed "the terrible immoralities which accompanied it on the evidence of testimonies persisting through all the centuries and which it still brings in its train". He expressed the hope that "the time is coming when the clergy will no longer be subject to this law of compulsory celibacy which undermines and ruins their moral health and the efficiency of their pastoral work." Henry C. Lee, an American protestant in his well documented book "The History of Clerical Celibacy in the Christian Church" supplies overwhelming evidence of the truth of these sombre statements of these two Roman Catholic priests who saw the results of this law from the inside.

It is wrong for a church to impose a law of celibacy which God has not imposed in His word. It is equally wrong for any Christian to undertake a lifelong vow in a matter which God has left free, for no-one knows what God's will for him will be in the future. The English Roman Catholic priest to whom I referred at the beginning undertook life-long celibacy at 17, but later he came to the conclusion that this was not God's will for him. It is wrong to enter into lifelong vows on matters which God has left free and about which God may lead us in different paths as our life unrolls.

There are some vows which we can take for life because we know God's will for us does not change in those matters. For example, at baptism the Christian takes a lifelong vow that he will renounce the devil and all his works and constantly obey God's holy law. This is a duty which can never change and so it is appropriate to take a vow to that effect. Similarly at marriage, husband and wife vow that they will live faithfully together so long as they both shall live. This again is the unchanging will of God for them and so it is appropriate to take such a vow. And though it may be God's will for us to live a single life we do not know for certain that this is God's unchanging will for us for the rest of our lives and so it is undoubtedly wrong to bind ourselves by a solemn vow that we will do so. Yet this is what the Roman Catholic church requires of young men still in their teens. The Roman Catholic church teaches its young priests that God will give them the strength to carry out their vow but this teaching has no basis for the vow was wrong in the first place. The Bible teaches that God has instituted marriage as a way by which Christians may live chastely. If we ignore God's provision and take a rash vow it is vain to deceive ourselves in believing that God will of necessity give us grace to keep it. Marriage is honorable in all, yet God calls some people to live a single life, and He gives them grace to do so. It is His will that others should be married; to compel such people to refrain from marriage if they are to be priests or ministers, is simply to put a moral stumbling block in front of them, with terrible results, as history shows. An improper vow entered on in this way when it is later seen to be contrary to the mind of God does not bind; but rather we should acknowledge our mistake in entering into it and be free from it in order to do the will of God as He makes that known to us. This is what the English Roman priest did. He should

undoubtedly have been released by the Roman church from his vows, although, in fact, there is no need for such a release as the vows ought never to have been entered into. However, for that church to maintain its obdurate attitude towards him and to suggest to his wife that she is not married and that their children should be put into homes, is not only cruel but plainly contrary to the mind of God as He has made His mind known to us in the Bible.

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