

Marriage of Clergy

by J.H. Newman

J.H. Newman argues for the legitimacy of marriage among clergy, emphasizing the Church's authority to adapt its rules to better serve its members.

Scripture: Matthew 19:11, Mark 7:7, Acts 15:28, 1 Corinthians 7:25, Colossians 2:20, 1 Timothy 3:2

Topics: "Clerical Celibacy", "Church Authority"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the lack of command by God's law for Bishops, Priests, and Deacons to vow the estate of single life or abstain from marriage. The observance of clerical celibacy is based on the Church's rule or vow, not on God's law. The English Church allows clergy to marry at their discretion, recognizing the wisdom in granting them this choice. The Church has the authority to alter ecclesiastical decrees and orders for just cause, as exemplified by Christ and the Apostles in changing certain practices. Newman emphasizes the importance of not being bound to man-made orders or decrees in religion, but having the authority to change them when necessary.

Transcript

Article xxxii. "Bishops, Priests, and Deacon, are not commanded by God's law, either to vow the estate of single life, or to abstain from marriage."

There is literally no subject for controversy in these words, since even the most determined advocates of the celibacy of clergy admit their truth. [As far as clerical celibacy is a duty, it] is grounded not on GOD'S law, but on the Church's rule, or on vow. No one, for instance, can question the vehement zeal of St. Jerome in behalf of this observance, yet he makes the following admission in his attack upon Jovinian: "You speak in vain, since the Apostle appointed Bishops, and Presbyters, and Deacons, the husbands of one wife, and having children. But, as the Apostle says, that he has not a precept concerning virgins, yet gives a counsel, as having received mercy of the Lord, and urges throughout that discourse a preference of virginity to marriage, and advises what he does not command, lest he seem to cast a snare, and to impose a burden too great for man's nature; so also, in ecclesiastical order, seeing that an infant Church was then forming out of the Gentiles, he gives the lighter precepts to recent converts, lest they should fail under them through fear." Adv. Jovinian. i. 34.

And the Council of Trent merely lays down:

"If any shall say that clerks in holy orders, or regulars, who have solemnly professed chastity, can contract matrimony, and that the contract is valid in spite of ecclesiastical law or vow, let him be anathema."--Sess. 24, Can. 9.

Here the observance is placed simply upon rule of the Church or upon vow, neither of which exists in the English Church; "therefore," as the Article logically proceeds, "it is lawful for them, as for all other Christian men, to marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same to serve better to godliness." Our Church leaves the discretion with the clergy; and most persons will allow that, under our circumstances, she acts wisely in doing so. That she has power did she choose, to take from them this discretion, and to oblige them either to marriage [(as is said to be the case as regards the parish priests of the Greek Church)] or to celibacy, would seem to be involved in the doctrine of the following extract from the Homilies; though, whether an enforcement either of the one or the other rule would be expedient and pious, is another matter. Speaking of fasting, the Homily says:--

"GOD'S Church ought not, neither may it be so tied to that or any other order now made, or hereafter to be made and devised by the authority of man, but that it may lawfully, for just cause, alter, change, or mitigate those ecclesiastical decrees and orders, yea, recede wholly from them, and break them, when they tend either to superstition or to impiety; when they draw the people from GOD rather than work any edification in them. this authority CHRIST Himself used, and left it to His Church. He used it, I say, for the order or decree made by the elders for washing oftentimes, which was diligently observed of the Jews; yet tending to superstition, our SAVIOUR CHRIST altered and changed the same in His Church into a profitable sacrament, the sacrament of regeneration, or new birth. This authority to mitigate laws and decrees ecclesiastical, the Apostles practiced, when they, writing from Jerusalem unto the congregation that was at Antioch, signified unto them, that they would not lay any further burden upon them, but these necessities: that, 'that they should abstain from things offered unto idols, from blood, from that which is strangled, and from fornication;' notwithstanding that Moses's law required many other observances. This authority to change the orders, degrees, and constitutions of the Church, was, after the Apostles' time, used of the father about the manner of fasting, as it appeareth in the Tripartite History. . . . Thus ye have heard, good people, first, that Christian subjects are bound even in conscience to obey princes' laws, which are not repugnant to the laws of God. Ye have also heard that CHRIST'S Church is not so bound to observe any order, law, or decree made by man, to prescribe a form in religion, but that the Church hath full power and authority from God to change and alter the same, when need shall require; which hath been shewed you by the example of our SAVIOUR CHRIST, by the practice of the Apostles, and of the Fathers since that time."--Homily on Fasting, pp. 242--244.

To the same effect the 34th Article declares, that,

"It is not necessary that traditions and ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to diversities of countries, times and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word. Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the traditions and ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of GOD, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly."--Article XXXIV.

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