

## Concerning Priests, Marriage and Vocation

As usual, the news media are sensationalizing recent remarks made by Pope Francis, as if he were in the process of making a radical break from the Church's past or proposing something completely alien to that history.

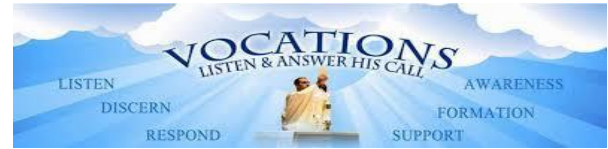
For many decades now, those of us who are ordained priests have heard the, sometimes insulting, suggestion that *"They oughta let you guys get married."* Now, of course, the person saying this probably means well: He or she doesn't want us to suffer in loneliness and to miss out on the joys of marriage, family life and the bearing of children.

Quite often, however, one perceives that the suggestion is being made so that we (celibate priests) might be made "normal" or "normalized." It is unsettling and weird to have this class of man out there in the world who is---well---not having sex. That's just weird, and it probably creates weirdos! Of course, it doesn't help that there are more than a few ordained eccentrics out there. And the scandal involving the sexual abuse of children by priests only served to confirm, beyond all doubt, that the attempt to be celibate turns a man into a depraved sex maniac or pervert. Mind you, no one ever says this out loud to one of us; it's all in the tone of voice when they say *"They oughta let you guys get married."*

So, Pope Francis expressed openness to the idea of married men being allowed to be ordained as Priests. This isn't really a new phenomenon. Eastern Rite Catholic priests can, in some cases, be married. And while the Latin Rite, in which I am ordained, has been stricter about the matter, there are widowers who have been ordained as well as ministers coming over from Anglicanism, Orthodoxy or Protestantism who have been accepted into the priesthood. In all likelihood, the Pope was expressing openness to an expansion of this allowance to married Catholic men. Guys like me, who are already ordained, will still be bound by a vow of celibacy.

Ostensibly, the new openness to this idea of married men getting ordained is aimed at the problem of a priest shortage. Perhaps it is thought that this will help alleviate the problem. But, like most problems

facing the Church these days, there are no quick fixes or "silver bullets." Would opening the priesthood to currently married men really swell the ranks? For a whole host of reasons, I have serious doubts.



**I propose that the much deeper issue, hidden in this conversation, is the muted sense of faith in the modern family and an almost complete loss of a sense of "vocation," . . . a sense of being "called" to some state of life by God and for His Kingdom.**

This problem is the same for marriage as it is for priestly ordination: It is the rare couple coming to the Church for the Sacrament of Marriage who think of their getting married as a "divine calling:" For the vast majority it is just simply a "natural choice" they made for themselves. And, in how many families is the priesthood ever spoken of, even as a possibility? In all honesty, I can tell you that it was never presented as such in my family: Even though we were regular Mass-goers, no one ever suggested to me that God might be calling me to one vocation or another. It was not until Fr. George Harrison said something to me on the way out of Mass one Spring morning circa 1979, that I had ever considered such a thing.

As for the issue of celibacy, this is a soundly biblical way of Christian Life: St. Paul proposes it in the First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter Seven. Jesus also makes mention of it in Matthew 19:12 wherein he speaks of ". . .some, [who have] renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it." In his case, St. Paul expressed a preference for the celibate way of life and, thereby, associated it with the roles of preaching, teaching and ministering.

Clearly, men not only need to be theologically trained for such a life, but they also need to be spiritually and psychologically prepared. Our hyper-sexualized world is neither friendly to married people nor priests. We need to lean on our faith that God will give us the grace to live our calling.