

IT IS UNORTHODOX TO HAVE MARRIED BISHOPS!

by

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Westerners tend to ‘interpret’ the spiritual issue regarding whether bishops should be celibate according to their own prejudices. Sometimes they even retreat to the canons citing c. V of the Apostolic Canons:

No Bishop, Presbyter, or Deacon shall put away his own wife under pretext of reverence. If, however, he put her away, let him be excommunicated; and if he persist in so doing, let him be deposed from office.

[Canon V of The 85 Canons of the Holy Apostles, *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, p. 7.]

However, it was always a custom of the Church that prelates be celibate and thus unmarried. Father Michael Pomazansky discusses “The Celibacy of Bishops” in his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*:

For a bishop there exists the *obligation* of celibacy. In the first centuries of Christianity, such a demand was not obligatory, but even in Apostolic times it was allowed for bishops to avoid marriage for the sake of the ascetic struggle of continence. This custom *became strengthened and the Sixth Ecumenical Council made it a canon* (all emphases supplied).

[at pp. 299-301.]

Canon XII of the Sixth Ecumenical Council ‘codified’ as an obligation throughout the Church what had been not only a custom but a *strengthening one over time*:

And this too has come to our knowledge, that both in Africa and Libya and other regions the most God-beloved Presidents there continue living with their own wives even after the ordination has been conferred upon them, and will not abandon their wives, thus becoming an offense and a scandal to others. We have therefore made it a matter of great concern to us to do everything possible for the benefit of the flocks under hand, and it has seemed best not to allow such a thing to occur hereafter at all. We assert this, however, not with any intention of setting aside or overthrowing any legislation laid down Apostolically, but having due regard for the salvation and safety of peoples and for their better advancement with a view to avoiding any likelihood of giving anyone cause to blame the priestly

polity. For the divine Apostle says: 'Do all everything for the glory of God, Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Greeks, nor to the Church of God: even as I try to please all men in everything, without seeking advantage of mine own, but the advantage of the many in order that they may be saved. Become ye imitators of me, just as I also am (an imitator) of Christ' (I Cor. 10:32-33 and 11:1). If anyone should be shown to be doing this, let him be deposed from office.

[*The Rudder*, c. XII, p. 303.]”

The **Interpretation** of c. XII immediately follows this canon:

Since we have learned that in Africa and Libya (either two names are applied to the same region, since one of the four continents of the earth which is situated to the south was formerly called Libya, and the name was afterwards changed to Africa, according to Chrysanthus, or else the name Libya is generally applied to the whole of that continent, and the name Africa to a particular province contained therein, according to Meletius), and in other regions, the prelates there, even after being ordained, keep on living with their wives, and thus cause others a scandal. hence we are making it our serious business to do everything possible that is calculated to contribute to the common benefit of the Christians who are being pastured and shepherded by us, and to this end we decree that from now on no prelate may live with his wife after he had been ordained.² We decree this, not with a view to overthrowing and setting aside so much the common Canon of the Apostles, their c.V, that is to say, which excommunicates any bishop who on the pretext of reverence forcibly separates his wife, as the injunction which St. Paul addresses specially to Titus in saying: ‘ordain elders (or presbyters) in every city, as I have appointed thee, if any be blameless, the husband of one wife’ (Titus 1:5-6) (in this passage the word ‘elders’ means bishops, according to St. Chrysostom, since a bishop also take the name of elder, as we have said previously at the beginning of Ap. c. I. This fact is plainly evident also from what the Apostle goes on to say, when he adds, ‘For a bishop must be blameless,’ etc.): no, I say, we decree this not by way of refuting them, but by way of providing for their salvation, and for the advancement of Christians to a state of greater perfection, and to prevent their causing any accusation against the prelacy. For though the prelates may live with their wives in sobriety and continence, yet the common people are scandalized and are inclined to accuse them, supposing the contrary to be the actual result of their living together in such a manner. The divine Apostle

commands that whatever we do we must do it for the glory of God, and that we must not become a scandal to Jews, and Greeks and Christians. Just as I, says he, try to please all persons by not seeking my own interest, but that of the multitude, that they may be saved, 'become ye imitators of me, just as I also am an imitator of Christ.' If any of the prelates is living with his wife, let him be deposed. See also Ap. c. V.

[*ibid.*, **Interpretation**, pp. 303-305.]

In addition, spiritually important footnote 2 of c. XII definitively lists and discusses the “three principal reasons” for the Sixth Ecumenical Council prohibiting a prelate from having a wife:

Note that it was for three principal reasons that this Council *prohibited* (emphasis supplied) by an Ecumenical Canon prelates from having a wife. (1) Because in the view of the fact that prelates belong to the consummate class and highest order of all ecclesiastical orders, they ought to be perfect in respect of virtues in general and in respect of virginity and purity in particular and above all: hence they ought to regulate their life with a view to strict sobriety. (2) Because prelates possessed of a wife and children were wont to bequeath the episcopate to their children at their own death as a legacy, and many of the things belonging to the Church would be plundered wrongfully and with evil consequences, just as Canon VI of the Apostles says this very same thing. And (3) Because the trouble of taking care of a wife, of children and of a whole household prevents them from giving the attention to the matter of exercising proper diligence in behalf of their flocks, since as St. Paul says, 'he that is married careth for the things of the world how he may please his wife' (I Cor. 7:33). So in order that all these absurdities and improprieties may be prevented from occurring, the present Ecumenical Council prohibited marriage to prelates by means of this Canon. I said 'by an Ecumenical Canon' *because even before this Council marriage was forbidden to prelates, but by a local, and not by a catholic, Canon* (emphasis supplied). And how do we know about this? First, from divine Chrysostom where he interprets the saying of St. Paul (which in speaking of bishops says: "If any be blameless, the husband of one wife" (Titus 1:6) and says "it was on this account that he said, 'the husband of one wife,' not that nowadays this restriction is observed in the Church, for a prelate must be adorned with a perfect sanctity and purity, but that in those times for the Greeks who were living in a state of constant fornication it was deemed a great thing for a husband to have one wife (Discourse 2 on Job). And secondly, from the canons of the regional council held in Carthage number IV and XXXIII which were

prevailing in the regions of Africa and which decreed that bishops, presbyters, and deacons had to make a definition, or, in other words, a definite promise to abstain from their wives (with the mutual consent, that is to say, of the wives). The present Council, on the other hand, decreed by means of the present Canon that the principle that bishops must abstain from their wives and not live with them at all is to be enforced everywhere in the world. But as for this principle that presbyters and deacons should be obliged to abstain from their wives too, in its Canon XXX it is true that it did allow this, though not everywhere, but only in those barbarian regions because of their savage character and instability of the faith. That such persons used to continue living, as the Council says, with their wives even after they had promised not to do so, is plainly evident from c.XXXIII of the same council of Carthage.

The present Canon, however, does *not* (emphasis supplied) conflict with Apostolic Canon V, or with the injunction of St. Paul, nor does it overthrow or refute these. First, because although the divine Apostles merely allowed prelates to have wives, but did not make this a law; on the contrary, in fact, they only made a confession to the weakness of people of those days, and to the matters of Jews and Gentiles: for the prelates of both Jews and Gentiles used to have wives. Hence divine Chrysostom (in the same Discourse) says: 'Appoint bishops, if any be blameless, the husband of one wife': not that he made this a law, but *because he made a concession to error* (all emphases supplied). But the present Council, seeing that the Church was advancing by strides and that the republic of Christians was flourishing in virtues, adjusted matters so that the republic of prelates might flourish with celibacy and sobriety. That, too, is why divine Chrysostom says, in interpreting the above saying of St. Paul's, that the only reason that St. Paul allowed marriage was because he knew that as soon thereafter as piety came to flourish, nature of herself would prefer the good of celibacy and of virginity, and the choice would favor the superior things and the better ways, of unmarried, that is to say, and virgin prelates. Secondly, the fact that although the Apostolic Canon prohibits a bishop from divorcing his wife, or at any rate forcing her to separate, without her agreeing and consenting to it, yet it does not forbid him to separate from his wife by agreement with her. The present Council, however, in its c. XLVIII, though allowing the wife of a man about to be ordained a prelate to get a divorce from him beforehand with their mutual consent, and after the ordination to enter a convent, does not at the same time allow the wife to be separated forcibly and against her will.

For if it said so, it would obviously be in conflict with the Apostles, and even with the very words of the Lord, which command that a marriage remain indissoluble. But since it does not say this, it is therefore evident that *neither does it conflict, but, on the contrary, rather agrees, with the Apostolic Canon* (emphasis supplied). Accordingly, briefly speaking, this Council, being encouraged by the advancement of the Church for the better, prefers unmarried men, or, more explicitly speaking, monks, for the prelacy; it does not want married men, not because it has any fault to find with marriage or because it blames and opposes marriage, but because it prefers celibacy as something better. For this reason it admits to the prelacy even those who have been married, but have separated from their wives, either at death or by mutual agreement, in accordance with the Apostle. Accordingly, it does not dissolve the marriage, but ordains a man a prelate that it finds free and unbound by marriage ties, of his own accord and agreement; and it deposes any prelate that continues to live with his wife even after the ordination. First, because as a result of living with her he may become so excited as to be prompted to fall so low as to have carnal intercourse with her, which is no longer lawful intercourse, as it was formerly; but, on the contrary, such intercourse is considered fornication and adultery, on account of the violation of the agreement and promise which he had made to observe continence with her. And secondly, on account of the scandal which such living together causes the laity, as the present Canon states word for word.

[*id.*, fn 2, pp. 303-305.]

Please note that there is no ‘conflict’ between c. XII’s confirmation of a longstanding strengthening custom within the Church and c. V of the Apostolic Canons. In fact, it agrees with that Apostolic canon. The key is that the Sixth Ecumenical Council confirmed the Church’s spiritual position that it, the Church, *prefers* unmarried men, monks, “for the prelacy, it does not want married men, not because it has any fault to find with marriage or because it blames and opposes marriage, but because it prefers celibacy as *something better* (emphasis supplied)”.

Whenever we deviate not only from a custom but a general obligation throughout the Church, we are being unOrthodox and uncanonical. As Orthodox, we are not ‘free’ to do so. Since the First Seven Ecumenical Councils were guided by the Holy Spirit, criticism of their confirmations of Orthodoxy as believed and practised by the Apostles and their successors is ill-advised. If you believe that the Sixth Ecumenical Council ‘erred’ and/or had a hidden agenda in ‘legislating’ c. XII, you probably have blasphemed the Holy Spirit.

Some Orthodox in the West [specifically the United States] appear to favour a ‘return’ to the very early Church in areas where they believe the early Church agreed with their current practise. But we are not allowed to escape back to the first few centuries to *avoid* the full Orthodoxy as confirmed by the First Seven Ecumenical Councils, other accepted Councils, which represent the ‘mind’ of the Fathers of the Church. In any case, their position sometimes put forth that the married episcopate was the spiritual ‘norm’ in the ‘good old days’ is contradicted by the holy spiritual discussion in *The Rudder*.

Is the exercise of *economia* available to allow Orthodox married bishops, which would otherwise be against the holy Tradition of the Church? This is not the homily to discuss this matter. But, just a few words... *If* *economia* is appropriate, those who would exercise it and allow married bishops in the contemporary period should remember that it is not to become general practise. If a so-called Orthodox jurisdiction has only married bishops and no monastic presence, how can it possibly be True Orthodox? Orthodoxy without monasticism and ascetic struggle is impossible to fathom!

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.