

Married Bishops in the Orthodox Church

A Sober Analysis

If a man desire the office of a Bishop, he desires a good work. A Bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, ...ruling well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity [1 Timothy 3:1-4].

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city as I had appointed you; If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accused of riot, or unruly [Titus 1:5,6].

Now when Jesus had come into Peter's house, He saw his wife's mother lying sick with a fever [Matthew 8:14].

But Simon's wife's mother lay sick with a fever, and they told Him about her at once [Mark 1:30].

Now He arose from the Synagogue and entered Simon's house. But Simon's wife's mother was sick with a high fever, and they made request of Him concerning her [Luke 4:38].

Introduction

First, we must establish the Biblical and thus traditional position of the Orthodox Church regarding the issue of married clergy. Secondly, we must guard against the allegations made by (some) Orthodox that the consecration of married men to the office of bishop is supposedly "uncanonical", somehow "unorthodox" or even worse, "heretical".

St Peter the Apostle

Undoubtedly, St. Peter and virtually all Apostles were married. Their marriage clearly did not nullify being chosen as Apostles by Christ. There is no reference to any children of the marriage, before or after the call as an Apostle. There is a clear Orthodox tradition that St Peter dedicated himself completely (lived celibate from that time on) to Christ from the time of his call. This can be seen in the following words of St Clement of Alexandria:

They say, accordingly, that blessed Peter, upon seeing his wife led to death, rejoiced on account of her call and conveyance home, and called very encouragingly and comfortingly, addressing her by name, 'Remember the Lord'. Such was the marriage of the blessed, and their perfect disposition towards those dearest to them. Thus also the Apostle says, 'That he who marries should be as though he married not', and deem his marriage free of inordinate affection, and inseparable from love to the Lord; to which the true husband exhorted his wife to cling on her departure out of this life to the Lord [p.541, Book 7, The Stromata, Clement of Alexandria, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2].

Evidence of Married Bishops in the early Church

The father of the Cappodacian Saints was a Married Bishop. *The elder Gregory was converted by the influence of his wife, Nonna; and soon after his conversion was consecrated to the bishopric of Nazianzus [p.187, Prolegomena, Sect. 1, Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7] (Note: This is Gregory the elder, not his son St Gregory Nazianzus). Note that, There are two lines in his poem of St Gregory Nazianzan on his own life which*

seem to indicate clearly that his birth took place after his father's elevation to the Episcopate... [p.188, Prolegomena, Sect. 1, Vol 7].

Basil left before him and returned to Cappadocia; and as soon as he could follow he went to Constantinople, where he met his brother, who had just come there to practice and return with his brother to Nazianzus. They found their parents still living and their father occupying the Episcopal Throne. From this time onward Gregory divided his time between his parents and his friend; living partly at Arianus, and partly with Basil in Pontus, in monastic seclusion. [p.191, Prolegomena, Sect. 1, Vol. 7].

Gregory,...felt very strongly drawn to the monastic life; but as retirement from the world did not seem to him to be his vocation, he resolved to continue to live in the world, and to be a help and support to his now aged parents, and especially to his father in the duties of his Episcopate, but at the same time to live under the strictest ascetic rule [ibid.].

In 374, Gregory the elder died, and his wife also, and thus our saint was set free from the charge of the diocese [p.195, ibid.].

Early Tradition on the marriage of St Gregory of Nyssa

Here it is usual to place the marriage of Gregory with Theosebeia, said to have been a sister of Gregory Nazianzus. Certainly the tradition of Gregory's (Nyssa) marriage received such credit as to be made in after times a proof of the non-celibacy of the Bishops of his age [p.3, A Sketch of the Life of St Gregory of Nyssa, Second Series, Vol. 5].

St John Chrysostom on Married Hierarchs

'A Bishop then,' he says, 'must be blameless the husband of one wife.' This he does not lay down as a rule, as if he must not be without one, but as prohibiting his having more than one. [p.438, First Series, Vol. 13, St John Chrysostom, Homily X, Homilies on Timothy] If then 'he who is married cares for the things of the world' (1 Cor. 7:33), and a bishop ought not to care for the things of the world, why does he say 'the husband of one wife'? Some indeed think that he says this with reference to one who remains free from a wife. But if otherwise, he that has a wife may be as though he had none (1 Cor. 7:29). For that liberty was then properly granted, as suited to the nature of the circumstances then existing. And it is very possible, if a man will, to regulate his conduct. [p. 438, ibid.]

'Having his children in subjection with all gravity.' This is necessary, that an example might be exhibited in his own house. [p.439. ibid.]

Verse 6: 'If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accused of riot, or unruly.' Why does he bring forward such a one? To stop the mouths of those heretics who condemned marriage, showing that it is not an unholy thing in itself, but so far honorable, that a married man might ascend the holy throne; and at the same reproving the wanton, and not permitting their admission into this high office who contracted a second marriage. For he who retains no kind regard for her who is departed, how shall he be a good presider? [p.524, Works of St John Chrysostomos, Homily on Titus, Homily 2, First Series, Vol. 13].

'Having faithful children, not accused of riot, or unruly.' We should observe what care he bestows upon children. For he who cannot be the instructor of his own children, how should he be the Teacher of others?...But, if occupied in the pursuit of wealth, he has made his children a secondary concern, and not bestowed much care upon them, even so he is unworthy. For if when nature prompted, he was so void of affection or so senseless, that he thought more of his wealth than of his children, how should he be raised to the episcopal throne, and so great a rule? [pp. 524/5, ibid.]

St Athanasius the Apostolic:But I have also thought it necessary to inform you of the fact, that Bishops have succeeded those who have fallen asleep. In Tanis, in the stead of Elias, is

Theodorus. In Arsenoitis, Silvanus instead of Nonnus. In Bucolia is Heraclius. In Tentyra, Andronicus is instead of Saprion, his father. In Thebes, Philon instead of Philon, etc. [pp.538/9, Letter 12, Sect. 2, Letters of St Athanasius, Second Series, Vol. IV, Athanasius]

For we know both bishops who fast, and monks who eat. We know bishops that drink no wine, as well as monks who do. We know bishops who work wonders, as well as monks who do not. Many also of the bishops have not even married, while monks have been fathers of children; just as conversely we know bishops who are fathers of children and monks 'of the completest kind' [p.560, Letter 49, Sect. 9, ibid.].

St Ambrose of Milan

And so the Apostle have given a pattern, saying that a bishop 'must be blameless', and in another place: 'A bishop must be without offense, as a steward of God, not proud, not soon angry, not given to wine, not a striker, not greedy of filthy lucre.' For how can the compassion of a dispenser of alms and the avarice of a covetous man agree together? I have set down these things which I have been told are to be avoided, but the apostle is the master of virtues, and he teaches that gainsayers are to be convicted with patience, who lays down that one should be the husband of a single wife, not in order to exclude him from the right of marriage (for this is beyond the force of the precept), but that by conjugal chastity he may preserve the grace of his baptismal washing; nor again that he may be induced by the Apostle's authority to beget children in the priesthood; for he speaks of having children, not of begetting them, or marrying again [p.465, Chapters 61 & 62, Letter 63, St Ambrose, Second Series, Vol. 10].

Origen

The Marriage of Church Dignitaries: But, while dealing with the passage, I would say that we will be able perhaps now to understand and clearly set forth a question which is hard to grasp and see into, with regard to the legislation of the Apostle concerning ecclesiastical matters; for Paul wishes no one of those of the church, who has attained to any eminence beyond the many, as is attained in the administration of the sacraments, to make trial of a second marriage. For laying down the law in regard to bishops in the first Epistle to Timothy, he says, 'If a man seeketh the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. The bishop, therefore, must be without reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded,' etc.; and, in regard to deacons, 'Let the deacons,' he says, 'be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well,' etc. ... And, in the Epistle to Titus, 'For this cause,' he says, 'I left thee in Crete that thou shouldst set in order the things that were wanting, and appoint elders in every city as I gave thee charge. If any one is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children, that believe'. Now, when we saw that some who have been married twice may be much better than those who have been married once, we were perplexed why Paul does not at all permit those who have been twice married to be appointed to ecclesiastical dignities; for also it seemed to me that such a thing was worthy of examination, as it was possible that a man, who had been unfortunate in two marriages, and had lost his second wife while he was yet young, might have lived for the rest of his years up to old age in the greatest self-control and chastity. Who, then, would not naturally be perplexed why at all, when a ruler of the church is being sought for, we do not appoint such a man, though he has been twice married, because of the expressions about marriage, but lay hold of the man who has been once married as our ruler, even if he chance to have lived to old age with his wife, and sometimes may not have been disciplined in chastity and temperance? But, from what is said in the law about the bill of divorcement, I reflect whether, seeing that the bishop and the presbyter and the deacon are a symbol of things

that truly exist in accordance with these names, he wished to appoint those who were figuratively once married. [pp.509/10, Book XIV, Origen's Commentary on Matthew, Vol. X, Ante Nicene Fathers]

Councils of the Church

Canon V of the Canons of the Twelve Apostles (Apostolic Canons):*Let not a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, put away his wife under pretense of religion; but if he put her away, let him be excommunicated; and if he persists, let him be deposed.*

Canon LI of the Apostolic Canons:*If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any one of the sacerdotal list, abstains from marriage, or flesh, or wine, not by way of religious restraint, but as abhorring them, forgetting that God made all things very good, and that he made man male and female, and blaspheming the work of creation, let him be corrected, or else be deposed, and cast out of the Church. In like manner a layman.*

In conclusion, the Apostolic Canons represent the very early Canon Law of the Church, that the Canons which make up the collection are of various dates, but that most of them are earlier than the year 300, and that while it is not possible to say exactly when the collection, as we now have it, was made, there is good reason for assigning it a date not later than the middle of the fourth century.... There can be no question that in the East the Apostolic Canons were very generally looked upon as a genuine work prepared by the Holy Apostles [p. 592, Vol.XIV, The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church].

Quinisext Council (Fifth-Sixth) [sometimes called the "Trullon Synod"]

Canon XII:*Moreover, this also has come to our knowledge, that in Africa and Libya, and in other places the most God-beloved bishops in those parts do not refuse to live with their wives, even after consecration, thereby giving scandal and offense to the people. Since, therefore, it is our particular care that all things tend to the good of the flock placed in our hands and committed to us - it has seemed good that henceforth nothing of the kind shall in any way occur. And we say this, not to abolish and overthrow what things were established of old by Apostolic authority, but as caring for the health of the people and their advance to better things, and lest the ecclesiastical state should suffer any reproach...But if any shall have been observed to do such a thing, let him be deposed.*

Commentary by Aristenus:*The fifth Apostolic canon allows neither bishop, presbyter, nor deacons to cast forth his wife under pretext of piety; and assigns penalties for any that shall do so, and if he will not amend he is to be deposed. But this canon on the other hand does not permit a bishop even to live with his wife after his consecration. But by this change no contempt is meant to be poured out upon what had been established by Apostolic authority, but it was made through care for the people's health and for leading on to better things, and for fear that the sacerdotal estate might suffer some wrong.*

Van Espen:*In the time of this Canon (of the Apostles) not only presbyters and deacons, but bishops also, it is clear, were allowed by Eastern custom to have their wives; and Zonaras and Balsamon note that even until the Sixth Council, commonly called in Trullo, bishops were allowed to have their wives.*

Canon XLVII:*The wife of him who is advanced to hierarchical dignity, shall be separated from her husband by their mutual consent, and after his ordination and consecration to the episcopate she shall enter a monastery situated at a distance from the abode of the bishop, and there let her enjoy the bishop's provision; and if she is deemed worthy she may be advanced to the dignity of a deaconess.*

On the Marriage of the Clergy

The doctrine and practice of the ancient Church in the East can be fittingly quoted in the words of the Rev. John Fulton in the introduction to the Third Edition of his *Index Canonum* [p.29, NY, 1892]. He says, *Marriage was no impediment to ordination even as a Bishop; and bishops, Priests and Deacons, equally with other men, were forbidden to put away their wives under pretext of religion. The case was different when a man was unmarried at the time of his ordination. Then he was held to have given himself wholly to God in the office of the Holy Ministry, and he was forbidden to take back from his offering that measure of his cares and his affections which must necessarily be given to the maintenance and nurture of his family* [p.365, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church.*].

St. Demetrius the Vine Dresser (Egyptian Patriarch)

The Coptic Orthodox Synaxarian records one of the early Patriarchs of the Church of Alexandria as being a married man. The record states he had lived a celibate life since the beginning of marriage and it is not known whether this is a later redaction to cover the obvious conflict that would ensue otherwise. In any case, the fact of his enthronement again confirms that the tradition of the Church at that time did not consider marriage to be a bar to even hold the highest office of the Orthodox Church.

The Byzantine Church

In 1990, an article from *The Orthodox Observer*, a Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America publication, states, *At the 1992 meeting of the clergy-laity conference of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America (Archbishop Iakovos), held in New Orleans, a formal resolution was sent to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople 'to consider returning to the practice of ordaining married priests as bishops as was done in the early church.' ... Earlier in December 1991, the Greek Archdiocese stated that it was the original practice of the Church for a married Episcopate.* Please also note that Archbishop Iakovos promoted the return of married bishops to worldwide Orthodoxy and agreed that individual jurisdictions could retain the Apostolic tradition of the Early Church.

Various Practices Regarding the Episcopacy

(1) **Celibate/Monastics Only:** The majority position among the Eastern Orthodox which has a large well of monastics to draw from. Also the position among the Oriental Orthodox, who, like their Eastern brethren, have a vibrant monastic community. Many of these Churches, having had married bishops in the early Church, did however draw from their monastics for over one thousand years (Armenians seemingly being the exception). However, it is noted that even among the Eastern Orthodox it is not unusual to elect a Priest to the Episcopacy whose wife has reposed first. Evidence is overwhelming that in the Orthodox Tradition marriage is not a bar to consecration. *Economia* and the will of the Orthodox Christians in the traditional homelands do not lend themselves to changing this current practice, which has served their churches very well for centuries.

(2) **Married but dedicated Celibacy:** The traditional position regarding the Apostles (St Peter, for example) and many of the married men that have been elevated in times past (St Demetrius the Vinedresser among the Coptic Orthodox, for instance) is supported by the Canonical authority of the Fifth-Sixth Council (Canons 12 and 47-see above). However, if the dedicated celibacy was due to the heretical view that marital relations were not honorable (sinful) then a clear rejection of the fifth and fifty-first canons of the Apostolic Canons would apply placing the rejector under anathema. This is an acceptable position

when the Church is in a missionary situation as it was in the days of the Apostles and early centuries (and currently among the Western hemisphere), but is not as needed when a large pool of spiritual monastics is granted to the Church by God. The practice is that the married couple live celibate from the time of dedication or consecration, usually with the wife also entering into monastic lifestyle or a community and frequently being received as a dedicated Deaconess.

(3) Married but not dedicated Celibacy: Perhaps the least controversial position due to the fact that the Bishop has not lived or promised to live a celibate life from consecration. Those who reject this position outright often bring the following verse to bear: "He who is married is concerned for his wife and the affairs of the world", alongside St Paul's words that it is 'better' to remain as he was, i.e. celibate. There are also references (see above) of married bishops that bore children in lawful Christian marriage after their consecration (although far less frequently and often alongside later attempts by writers to re-write the facts of the matter). The Biblical references relating to the bishop being married and having in submission his children does not imply that the children came after the elevation to the Episcopate. However, the lawful Christian state of marriage itself determines that the married but not celibate Episcopate has not committed any sin that would prevent him from consecration. Of course not all things that are 'lawful are also expedient' and thus, this third position causes much confusion and consternation among some Orthodox. The Canons of the Fifth-Sixth Council direct all married bishops to separate from their wives and live a dedicated life and these are often quoted by those who deny the correctness of this position. However, the earlier Apostolic Canons direct the exact opposite that one was not allowed to put away ones wife. Obviously this matter falls well within the Oiconomia of the bishops in a particular Synod to determine the married episcopate for their jurisdiction.

Various Objections Raised Regarding a Married Episcopacy

The Church decided in later centuries to change to monastic bishops only.

At a number of question forums where the laity have a chance to ask various Bishops for their response to why the Church no longer has married Bishops (as Holy Scriptures allow and the Church Fathers attest to) we found that the common answer is often: *The whole church decided to change the practice in the third century.* The response from the blessed bishops is somewhat ill-informed and assumed to be the case, rather than de facto is the case:

[a] The Universal Church made no such declaration in the 3rd century nor the centuries immediately following that time.

[b] The exact opposite actually occurred. At the 1st Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 AD, the Western (Roman) legates attempted force Canons requiring celibacy of all clergy. These attempted amendments however failed, and a large part of their failure were the words of St Paphnutius of the Church of Alexandria, a Saint and miracle worker who was famed and respected across the empire, even receiving admiration from the Emperor himself. What made St Paphnutius' words even more impressive is that he himself had been a celibate monastic since entering the life as a teenager. Here a strictly ascetic monastic argued against the enforced celibacy of any rank of the Church's offices (cf. Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers, Volume 14, The Seven Ecumenical Councils: "Proposed Action on Celibacy"): *That too heavy a yoke ought not to be laid upon the clergy; that marriage and married intercourse are of themselves honorable and undefiled; that the Church ought not to be injured by an extreme severity, for all could not live in absolute continency. In this way (by not prohibiting marital relations) the virtue of the wife would be much more certainly preserved (viz. the wife of a clergyman, because she might find injury elsewhere, if her husband withdrew from the marriage). The intercourse of a man with his*

lawful wife may also be a chaste intercourse. It would therefore be sufficient, according to the ancient tradition of the Church, if those who had taken holy orders without being married were prohibited from marrying afterwards; but those clergymen who had been married only once as laymen, were not to be separated from their wives.

This discourse of St. Paphnutius made so much more of an impression, since he had never lived in matrimony himself, and had had no conjugal intercourse. St. Paphnutius had been brought up in a monastery, and his great purity of manners had rendered him especially celebrated. Therefore the Council took the serious words of the Egyptian bishop into consideration, stopped all discussion upon the law, and left to each cleric the responsibility of deciding the point as he would. We must conclude that a law was proposed at the Council of Nicaea in the same way as the one which had been carried twenty years previously at Elvira, Spain. This coincidence would lead us to believe that it was the Spaniard Hosius who proposed the law respecting celibacy at Nicaea. The discourse ascribed to St. Paphnutius, and the consequent decision of the Synod, agree very well with the text of the Apostolic Constitutions, and with the whole practice of the Greek Church in respect to celibacy. Both, the Greek Church as well as the Latin one accepted this principle, that whoever had taken holy orders before marriage, ought not to be married afterwards. In the Latin Church, bishops, priests, deacons, and even sub-deacons, were considered to be subject to this law, because the latter were at a very early period reckoned among the higher servants of the Church, which was not the case in the Greek Church. The Greek Church went so far as to allow deacons to marry after their ordination, if they had obtained permission from their bishop to do so. The Council of Ancyra affirms this (Canon 10). We see that the Greek Church wishes to leave the bishop free to decide the matter; but, in reference to priests, it also prohibited them from marrying after their ordination. While the Latin Church exacted of those presenting themselves for ordination, even as sub-deacons, that they should not continue to live with their wives (if they were married), the Greek Church gave no such prohibition; but if the wife of an ordained clergyman died, the Greek Church allowed no second marriage. The Apostolic Constitutions decided this point in the same way. To leave their wives from a pretext of piety was also forbidden to Greek priests; and the Synod of Gangra (Canon 4) took up the defense of married priests against the Eustathians. Eustathius, however, was not alone among the Greeks opposing the marriage of all clerics, and in desiring to introduce into the Greek Church the Latin discipline regarding this matter. St. Epiphanius also inclined towards this side. The Greek Church did not, however, adopt this rigor in reference to priests, deacons, and sub-deacons, but by degrees it came to be required of bishops and of the higher order of clergy in general, that they should live in celibacy. Yet this was not until after the compilation of the Apostolic Canons (Canon 5) and of the Constitutions; for in those documents mention is made of bishops living in wedlock, and Church history shows that there were married bishops (for instance, Bishop Synesius in the fifth century). But it is fair to remark, even as to Synesius, that he made it an express condition of his election to the episcopate, that he might continue to live the married life. Thomassin believes that Synesius did not seriously require this condition, and only spoke thus for the sake of escaping the episcopal office; which would seem to imply that in his time Greek bishops had already begun to live in celibacy. At the Trullan Synod (Canon 13) the Greek Church finally settled the question of the marriage of priests (First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, Proposed Action on Clerical Celibacy, Second Series, Vol. XIV, pp. 51/2). [c] The Church enforced celibate Bishops to stop Nepotism: This explanation perhaps gives us the clearest reason why the Church moved away from married bishops. Nepotism is where the ecclesiastical dignity is passed down from father to son and becomes a sort of family empire, something that the Church can never be. This phenomenon can be seen today, for instance in the Billy Graham and Pat Robertson enterprises and other ministries where the sons are effectively taking over as the inheritors to their fathers.

While this may not always be a bad thing or necessarily against the will of God, it does lead to the confusion of the laity who would begin to see an element of family empire building in the making. In order to end the passing of ecclesiastical properties as inheritance to sons, the Church began to choose men who were never married, and thus no claims for inheritance could be leveled. This perhaps was valid during the days when the bishops held all property and legal deeds, and corporations did not exist. Nowadays, at an age of public disclosure of banking and financial accounts, with lay treasurers and financial committees etc, there is little to no chance of such to occur.

[d] The need of an Ecumenical Council to change back: This is seemingly a valid statement made by those who reject the married Episcopate. They assert that since an Ecumenical council declared the matter closed, then it requires another Ecumenical Council to change that. This argument is flawed in a number of points: First, an ecumenical council did NOT declare the matter closed. On the contrary, The Council of Nicea refused to implement this discipline. Secondly, the Fifth-sixth Council did NOT ban married bishops, but implemented a set discipline upon them. Thirdly, there has not been an Ecumenical Council since the schism of the Church and there is not likely to be one in any foreseeable future. We no longer have Christian Emperors who can call an Ecumenical Council, let alone the fact that the whole Roman Church would obviously fail to attend any Council called by the East. Amusingly, the answer (of needing another Ecumenical Council to settle the matter) really does not deal with the issue but 'passes the buck' to some indefinite, improbable future event. Such would not be acceptable from a theological or canonically viewpoint, since Oiconomia has always allowed the bishops to determine how to enforce or interpret the Canons in their particular circumstances. Recently allowances in matters of ecclesiastical discipline have been observed in a number of jurisdictions, including priest's being able to remarry, bishops being transferred to other dioceses, "Coadjutor" type bishops in dioceses that are not under their authority, monks leaving their vows being allowed to marry, more than one bishop in one city, etc. - Yet none of these recent matters were left to a futuristic Ecumenical Council.

Summary

We believe the above information and the facts of history stand for themselves and do not need a defense. It is rather the other side in need of defense, from a Scriptural, Patristic and canonical point of view. Additionally, the western hemisphere is not like the homelands of Eastern or Oriental Orthodoxy which had two thousand years of resources to draw from suitable monastics available for consecration. Though the earlier Canons are believed by Orthodox tradition to come directly via Apostolic authority, the later ones by an assumed one-size-fits-all decision by the Fifth-sixth Council. Canonical commentators have not been able to resolve the obvious differences other than simply to note them. Oiconomia is the only way this issue should be resolved in the Orthodox faith, as it always has been. For one jurisdiction to use one set of Canons against another jurisdiction's interpretation or Oikononomia is neither appropriate nor Orthodox.

[Source: www.stmaryorthodoxchurch.org/orthodoxy/articles/married_bishops]