Various documents of the Magisterium assert that celibacy is superior to marriage. And these documents usually base their assertion on three main texts: Mt 19:10-12; 1 Cor 7:32-34; and the Council of Trent (Sess. XXIV, can. 10). In the present article, I would like to respectfully submit the hypothesis, on the basis of the accumulated research of many different authors, that the three texts put forward by the Magisterium as founding the superiority of celibacy over marriage, present notable difficulties for such an interpretation. Should my hypothesis be retained as worthy of consideration, then the Magisterium would not ipso facto be constrained to abandon its traditional position. It could simply maintain that the texts in question, although open to other interpretations, can still serve to buttress the traditional position. Or, again, the Magisterium could maintain its position, but base it on

1. Let it be understood once and for all that “celibacy” is here understood as the unmarried state chosen in the light of the Christian faith.

2. V.g. Pius XII, Sacra virginitas, no. 21; Vatican II, Optatam totius, no. 10; Paul VI, Sacerdotalis coelibatus, nos. 20-24; John Paul II, Familiaris consortio, no. 17; etc. Here is an excerpt of this latter document: “Virginity or celibacy, by liberating the human heart in a unique way (cf. 1 Cor 7:32-35), ‘so as to make it burn with greater love for God and all humanity’ (Vatican II, Perfectae caritatis, no. 12), bears witness that the Kingdom of God and his justice is that pearl of great price which is preferred to every other value no matter how great, and hence must be sought as the only definitive value. It is for this reason that the Church, throughout her history, has always defended the superiority of this charism to that of marriage, by reason of the wholly singular link it has with the Kingdom of God.’ See Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio (November 22, 1981), no. 17.
other, more satisfactory texts. Or, finally, the Magisterium could decide to nuance its position and say, for example, that celibacy is superior to marriage secundum quid (i.e. in some respects, or relatively speaking), whereas marriage could be superior to celibacy in other respects. Naturally, it is not for me to settle this matter. As an exegete, my modest role is to analyze texts, ask questions, offer tentative answers from the limited point of view of my discipline, and let the ecclesiastical authority evaluate the validity of my findings.

And so, taking my lead from the Magisterium's frequent references to the three aforementioned texts, my article will be divided in four parts. In the first part, I will analyze Mt 19:10-12. Then, in the second part, I will submit various comments on 1 Cor 7:32-34. In the third part, I will present some brief reflections on the relevant text of Trent. And, in the fourth and last part, I will suggest a few added considerations.

I. THE SAYING ON THE EUNUCHS (Mt 19:10-12)

1. THE TEXT

10His disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

11But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.

12For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." (NRSV)

2. IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

These three verses follow immediately after a declaration of Jesus on indissoluble marriage (vv.1-9). They begin with a violent reaction on the part of the disciples: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (v.10). The declaration of Jesus follows (vv.11-12).
This declaration of Jesus can be understood in two different ways. According to the traditional interpretation, it would be dealing with a teaching on celibacy freely chosen in view of the Kingdom. However, since 1959, the year when Jacques Dupont published a study on these verses, several exegetes and theologians (Q. Quesnell, P. Bonnard, J. Radermakers, R. Tannehill, T. Hart, etc.) understand the episode differently. According to them, we would not be dealing here with a teaching on celibacy, but with a doctrinal supplement on *indissoluble marriage*. I believe this latter interpretation to be better. It rests on four arguments: the literary composition of the passage, the literary composition of the entire chapter, the vocabulary, and Matthew's theology. Let us look rapidly at each one of these arguments.

3. LITERARY COMPOSITION OF THE PASSAGE

a) The structure of the subsequent episode of the rich young man in this same chapter (19:23-26) seems to offer an exact parallel to our pericope. And so, an examination of the way that episode "functions" dynamically will help us to understand how our pericope should be read.

For this purpose, however, we must first take into consideration the manner in which the Synoptics (not John) usually write. In their case, when the disciples react unfavorably to an abrupt saying of Jesus, we never see him answering them *directly* by challenging their unintelligent remarks. What he

3. See J. Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l’évangile: Matthieu 19,3-12 et parallèles* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959) esp. 161-222. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will be following this author very closely.


does at most is to use their reaction as an opportunity to clarify his thought. As Quesnell rightly states: "The ordinary function of the disciples' speeches in the gospels is to ask questions, to misunderstand or object, or simply to advance the action dramatically. They do not enunciate the Christian ideal of life. Their objections are not accepted and confirmed by the Master, but are refuted, or made the occasion for stronger restatements of the original teaching." And, at this point of his article, this same author examines systematically all the interventions of the disciples in Matthew's gospel up to the episode of the rich young man. Here are his findings:

1) The disciples make a statement and Jesus corrects it and/or rebukes them in 8:19-20; 8:21-22; 8:25-26; 14:26-27; 14:30-31; 15:12-13; 15:15-16; (15:23-24); 16:6-7; (17:19-20); 18:1-2; 18:21-22.

2) Jesus says something; the disciples correct him, rebuke him, misunderstand him, etc.; he then silences, rebukes or corrects them and/or reaffirms his teaching or continues his demand in 14:16-18; 15:32-38; 16:21-23; 19:23-26.


4) There is no comment or reaction to the disciples' statement in 16:33 (where Matthew has replaced Mark's explicit statement of non-understanding — Mk 6:52 — with a confession of faith); and in 17:4 (where Peter's statement also remains uncriticized — contrast Mk 9:6).

In all of Matthew until the episode of the rich young man, then, only once does a disciple make a statement which is approved by Jesus, in Mt 16:15ff.: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But the reason for Jesus' approval is precisely that this statement does not come from the disciple himself, but from a revelation of God! And so, as far as Matthew is concerned, there is no real exception in his manner of treating statements from the disciples: these never enun-

ciate Jesus’ thought but, rather, always betray it in some aspect or other. Consequently, in the light of this Matthean redactional technique, we are now in a better position to understand the thought-sequence of the episode of the rich young man (19:23-26).

There we find a first statement of Jesus on the danger of wealth: a rich person has more difficulty entering God’s kingdom than a camel can pass through the eye of a needle (vv.23-24). Then a violent reaction follows on the part of the disciples: “Then who can be saved?” (v.25). Now this question is really a disguised conclusion to the effect that, on the basis of what Jesus has just said, no one could be saved. However, this conclusion would once again constitute a misunderstanding of Jesus’ thought, as usually happens. And so, Jesus does what he often does in such circumstances: he implicitly refuses to abound with them and is content with supplementing his previous statement, not by answering the disciples’ unenlightened question, but by providing a qualification to his statement: it is not absolutely impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, because God can make this possible by his grace. And so, v.26 must be read in consequence like all of Jesus’ statements in such circumstances. When Jesus says: “For mortals, that is impossible, but all things are possible for God,” the that is connected with Jesus’ prior statement, not with the question of the disciples.

b) Given the fact that our logion on the eunuchs presents the same structure as that of this dialogue with the apostles about the danger of wealth, and in view of the Matthean redactional technique just analyzed above, one is brought to conclude that the logion on the eunuch is likewise not an answer to the disciples’ violent reaction (“it is better not to marry”), and even less an acceptance or an approval of their statement. Rather, it represents an added explanation on Jesus’ prior declaration concerning indissoluble marriage: because marriage is indissoluble, the man who is separated from his wife must continue to live a celibate life, in faithfulness to the conjugal bond; he is a eunuch in relation to all other women.

c) If, on the other hand, we supposed that vv.10-12 form
a teaching about celibacy (instead of marriage), we would have to suppose by the same token that the logical thread of the discourse is broken and that Jesus abandons the question of indissoluble marriage to take up another topic. And this, after the dramatic build-up of the nine preceding verses! Naturally, such a reading of the pericope is not impossible, but it does seem less natural than a reading which preserves the unity of the whole of vv.1-12 by understanding vv.10-12 as also pertaining to the question of indissolubility.

4. LITERARY COMPOSITION OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter 19 in its totality does really seem to deal with the radical demands of Jesus for entrance into the kingdom.

a) If we leave aside for the moment vv.10-12 which are precisely in need of an explanation, we have the following content:

— vv.13-15: in order to enter into the kingdom, one must become like a child;
— vv.16-22: the episode of the rich young man shows to what point detachment from wealth (which can go as far as total renunciation) is indispensable in order to enter the kingdom;
— vv.23-26: a wealthy person can hardly enter the kingdom, unless God intervenes with his powerful grace;
— vv.27-29: who will enter the kingdom? those who will have left everything to follow Jesus.

b) This unity of composition for the whole of the chapter invites us to read vv.1-12 as a teaching also bearing on the conditions of entrance into the kingdom. By connecting divorce with adultery, vv.1-9 implicitly establish a link between indissolubility of marriage and entrance into the kingdom. This teaching will later be made explicit by Paul: “Adulterers . . . will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9-10). In this general context, therefore, could vv.10-12 bear on anything else than on entrance into the kingdom?

c) Now, if we maintain the traditional exegesis according to which vv.10-12 teach an optional celibacy reserved to a small number, we are not dealing any more with a radical
condition of *entrance* into the kingdom. For indeed, according to this exegesis such a celibacy is not required for entrance into the kingdom; it would be, rather, an announcement of the kingdom, an anticipation of the kingdom, or something like that.

d) Consequently, those upholding the traditional exegesis would have to suppose that vv.10-12 are *the only verses* in this whole chapter not bearing on the conditions of entrance into the kingdom. This conclusion is not impossible, but it seems less natural than the contrary conclusion, namely: that vv.10-12 are aimed at those married disciples who, being separated from their spouse, live as voluntary eunuchs for the purpose of entering the kingdom thanks to their acceptance of Jesus’ teaching on indissoluble marriage.

e) All this harmonizes with a fundamental theme of Matthew on the conditions of entrance into the kingdom. For achieving admittance into the kingdom, no sacrifice is too costly: pluck out an eye, cut off a hand, and even behave like a eunuch! We are very far from a mere optional counsel given to a small number of disciples.

5. VOCABULARY

a) The term “eunuch” (*eunouchos*) refers to one who is incapable of performing the act of intercourse. He is not necessarily a bachelor. The rabbinical texts of the Mishna (Yebamot 8,4; 8,6 . . .) are apt to speak of *married eunuchs*. The Bible itself knows the case of Potiphar, characterized as a eunuch (Gn 39,1), who nevertheless had a wife. In the Jewish mentality, what is impossible to the eunuch is not marriage but rather intercourse. The term refers directly to this physiological deficiency. The term chosen by Jesus, then, is not applicable, strictly speaking, to persons living in the state of celibacy, because it is not *marriage as such* which is involved here, but merely intercourse.

b) Consequently, understood metaphorically the term “eunuch” does not necessarily refer to a man who has chosen celibacy as a permanent state. It could equally refer to a husband who, having separated from his wife, is constrained
to live in continence because he would not be able to marry another woman without committing adultery.

6. MATTHEAN THEOLOGY

Here the reasoning can take two different paths: that of theological likelihood and that of internal coherence.

A. THEOLOGICAL LIKELIHOOD

If we supposed, with the traditional exegesis, that vv.11-12 were about *celibacy*, we would have to suppose, too, that Jesus accepts the disciples' objection in v.10 about the excessive rigor of his teaching about indissoluble marriage, that he admits they are right and that he then goes on to say that, because of his excessive demands, it is better indeed not to marry "for those who understand." This would be attributing to Jesus a very pessimistic view on the possibilities of an indissoluble union. Celibacy would then appear as a last resource; given the demands of indissoluble marriage, it is better not to take the risk and rather to remain a bachelor. It is difficult to imagine Jesus sharing such petty views.

B. INTERNAL COHERENCE

a) The teaching of vv.11-12 can hardly be about a voluntary celibacy seen as a state of greater perfection which only a restricted group of disciples would be able to "understand." For indeed, in Matthew to "understand" is the characteristic of the true disciple, the essential prerogative of any disciple as opposed to "those outside." We are dealing here with a theme dear to Matthew: one need only think of ch. 13 on the parables, of the logion on the yeast in 16:5-12, of the question about the return of Elijah in 17:10-13, of the saying on the pure and the impure in 15:10-11, of the stilled storm in 14:32-33, and, above all, of the many significant omissions of the Markan source when the latter underlines the incomprehension of the disciples.

b) Because of this, it is hardly thinkable that vv.10-12 and
their reference to the "understanding" of the disciples could apply only to some of them, those who would be called to voluntary celibacy. We are necessarily dealing here with a teaching addressed to any true disciple of Jesus. Now any true disciple of Jesus understands and accepts Jesus' radical demands on indissoluble marriage. Likewise, any true disciple understands and accepts that one must sometimes, within the requirements of this indissoluble marriage, practice continence as a condition of entrance into the kingdom.

7. ADDED CONSIDERATIONS

a) When advocating the superiority of celibacy (1 Cor 7), Paul does not refer to this logion at all,\(^\text{10}\) and this is all the more surprising that, in the same context, while discussing the indissolubility of marriage he does refer (1 Cor 7:10) to a statement made by Christ himself! In fact, Paul has to admit (1 Cor 7:25) that he cannot base himself on any teaching of Jesus in this matter of celibacy. In other words, that marriage is indissoluble, he knows as from the Lord. But that celibacy is better than marriage, he does not know as from the Lord.

b) As a confirmation of this, one might take note of what T. Hart writes in this regard: "There is in the Gospels no campaign on behalf of sexual abstinence or any clear indication that marriage is an inferior way of following in Jesus' way. There are no discourses in this spirit, no parables; nor does Jesus anywhere call attention either to his own or his mother's virginity.\(^\text{11}\)

c) Some argue that this passage is about celibacy because of the way in which Jesus presents his teaching: it is something difficult to understand, something that not all will be able to grasp (vv.11 and 12b). These authors surmise that,

\(^{10}\) Some exegetes claim that Paul was not familiar with this logion — see, e.g., E. Stauffer, *Die Botschaft Jesu damals und heute* (Berne, 1959) 79ff. — but this is not likely. Matthew clearly wrote his gospel for the Jewish-Christians of Palestine, and we know from Acts that Paul paid frequent visits to Jerusalem. It is therefore more than probable that he would have known a Matthean teaching of Jesus on celibacy, if such a teaching had existed.

if indissoluble marriage is not easy to accept because of its existential problems, it is nevertheless easier to accept than absolute celibacy, because at least marriage is the natural vocation of the vast majority of people, whereas the celibate state is a rare vocation. And so, they spontaneously connect the words “this teaching” (ton logon touton) of Jesus’ reply (“Not everyone can accept this teaching”) to the following verse about the three kinds of eunuchs. But this interpretation is questionable for three reasons:

1° Gramatically, the expression ton logon touton, as J. Blinzler rightly observes, can only refer to something that precedes, v.g. here, to the statement Jesus has just made in v.9 about the indissolubility of marriage.¹²

2° We should not forget that the celibate state was far from unknown at the time of Jesus, especially celibacy chosen for a religious reason. For instance, the celibacy of the Roman vestal virgins, of the Essenes and of other groups was highly regarded in the Ancient world. The remarks of Jesus, therefore, on the difficulty of understanding his teaching need not necessarily point to a teaching about celibacy as such.

3° The insistence of Jesus on the difficulty of his teaching makes better sense if he is saying that, even though one is abandoned by an unfaithful spouse, one must remain faithful to that spouse in perpetual celibacy — in case the spouse would repent and would want to resume conjugal life. Not many “outsiders” of the Christian faith can understand and accept such a teaching — even among contemporary Christians! As Q. Quesnell writes:

This is a great and frightening doctrine of the meaning and power of love. The husband and wife are called in marriage to show forth this love in their life of union. Each one of the two is called to it — no matter what the other party does. It will be one way, in

¹² See J. Blinzler, Aus der Welt und Umwelt des Neuen Testaments. Gesammelte Aufsätze I (Stuttgart, 1969) 32. Indeed, this author is so convinced of the validity of this grammatical analysis that he bases himself on it to prove (unconvincingly, I believe) that v.11 was displaced and came originally after v.12c. See his article, “Eisin eunouchoi. Zur Auslegung von Mt. 19, 12,” Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 48 (1957) 254-70, in particular 265ff.
fact, of showing that there is — in Christian belief — no truly unworthy object of love. Every human person is worth loving unto death. Every person and any person is worth ‘wasting one’s life on’ — as Christ gave up his life for us.  

A call to celibacy would be especially odd in Matthew because he otherwise omits as a rule everything of this sort from the material he shares with Luke and/or Mark. To give a few examples of this Matthean trait, when Lk 14:26 and 18:29 enumerate the persons and things a man leaves behind for the sake of the kingdom, Matthew agrees with Luke with one exception: the wife. Likewise, in the Lucan story of the great feast (14:15-24), Matthew omits from among the obstacles to accepting the Lord’s invitation the fact of marriage (“I have married a wife”); furthermore, whereas Luke calls his great feast a mere “banquet,” Matthew calls his a “wedding feast” (gamos, instead of deipnon).

Conclusion. As can be seen, in the case of the call of the rich young man as well as in the case of the eunuchs for the kingdom, we are not dealing with an “evangelical counsel” in the technical sense of the term. We are always dealing with an absolute obligation imposed in a particular case. Whenever the situation requires it, we must be ready to accept the most absolute demands “for the sake of the kingdom.” On the other hand, these demands, which are those of the Sermon on the Mount, are not aimed at a category of “perfect,” but are addressed to everybody without exception. It is up to each person to live them according to his or her spiritual state before God.

II. PAUL’S TEACHING ON CELIBACY (1 Cor 7:25-40)

1. THE TEXT (passim)

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. [. . . ]

Those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short. [. . .]

For the present form of this world is passing away. [. . .]

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord;

but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife,

and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband.

I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

2. INTRODUCTORY REMARK

As recently as 1979, F. Dreyfus could state that, to the best of his knowledge, there were no articles or monographs presenting the state of affairs on the problem of the relationship between celibacy and marriage in 1 Cor 7. Untill then, he added, those who had written on this topic had done so in a fragmentary and incomplete fashion. My own findings, some 16 years later, sadly confirm Dreyfus' opinion. Because of this extraordinary lack of literature on the topic, I will have to restrict myself to a few basic remarks. These remarks will focus on v.25 ("Paul's advice"), vv.28b-29a and 31b ("Paul's horizon"), and finally on vv.32-35 ("Divided vs. undivided").

3. PAUL'S ADVICE (v.25)

This is not at all an evangelical counsel, since Paul admits

he cannot base his advice on any declaration of the Lord. One can at best speak of an apostolic counsel. But what is exactly the weight of this counsel? Does Paul propose it with the full weight of his apostolic authority, as some exegetes believe? In itself, that is certainly possible. But it is not obvious. A certain number of authors (v.g. J. Héring, C. K. Barrett) believe that here Paul confines himself to giving his personal opinion, but without referring to his apostolic authority. He is content to speak as a thoughtful Christian, one who deserves a hearing. This latter exegesis is far from certain. However, it has in its favor the fact that, as a rule, when Paul intends to use his apostolic authority, he insinuates clearly enough that he is doing so through the tone and the expressions he uses. Now, surely we have here one of the most discreet statements of all the epistles in this regard! If, therefore, we can agree to distinguish in Paul the theologian speaking in his own name and the apostle speaking in the name of Christ, then we would have in this passage a quite natural application of that distinction. In such a case, consequently, one would have to conclude that these verses contain, not an apostolic judgment, but simply the advice of a spiritual man. In other words, such an advice could hardly represent a dogmatic view binding the Church forever. It would even be conceivable that the contrary opinion be validly proposed by other spiritual persons.

4. PAUL’S HORIZON (vv.28b-29a and 31b)

At the time Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians, he is still anticipating an imminent end of the world. In the words of C. H. Talbert,

Paul believed in an imminent End, so that he, at this time at least, believed he would be alive when the Lord returned (1 Cor 15:51; 1 Th 4:15). This belief would have arisen from his conviction that with the resurrection of Jesus the general resurrection had begun.

Christ was 'the first fruit of those who had fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20). If the first apple has turned red on the tree, can the harvest of the rest be far away?"  

This eschatological horizon of Paul's thought is rightly underscored by many authors, such as L. Legrand, X. Léon-Dufour, M. E. Thrall, H. D. Wendland, W. Barclay, John L. McKenzie, O. L. Yarbrough, etc. This conclusion seems inescapable if we take into account the eschatological vocabulary and expressions the apostle uses in this passage: "in view of the impending crisis" (v.26), "distress" (v.26 — the term used here, thlipsis, is a technical term belonging to the apocalyptic vocabulary), "the appointed time has grown short" (v. 29), "the present form of the world is passing away" (v.31).  

Now, because of this particular horizon of his, Paul views marriage as problematic — not for theological reasons, but for practical ones. For indeed, how can one burden oneself with matrimonial obligations in such a juncture? In a context of imminent catastrophe, the situation of married people can only be compared unfavorably to that of the unmarried. The reason for this is evoked graphically by M. Thrall:

Both Jews and Christians thought that the period of time immediately before the end of the world would be a time of unprecedented calamity and disaster (a time of stress). There would

be wars, earthquakes, and famines, and the Temple in Jerusalem would be desecrated (see Mark 13:7-8,14-20). In particular it would be a time of hardship and sorrow for women with babies and for expectant mothers. Paul extends this idea to include all those with family ties, both men and women. Presumably the point is that they will have to endure not only their own individual sufferings but also the pain and grief of seeing husbands, wives, or children suffer as well.25

Apparently, this picture of the situation as it must have appeared to Paul is not an exaggerated one, for we find traditional apocalyptic warnings against marriage and the birth of children, for example, in 4 Ezra 5:8 and 6:12; Enoch 99:5; and Mk 13:17.

As a confirmation of all this, we can compare how, years later, when the apocalyptic fever has abated, Paul writes to the Ephesians26 about marriage. Then, as some authors have remarked (v.g. W. Barclay,27 E. Schillebeeckx28), his evaluation of marriage is much more positive, no doubt because by that time he had realized that Christians would henceforth be living in a permanent situation, not one that could end in catastrophe at any moment. In such a different context, Paul could look at marriage from a completely different perspective. And so, we could perhaps conclude that W. Barclay might be expressing a valid insight when he writes that,

had Paul thought that he and his converts were living in a permanent situation, he would never have written as he did. By the time he wrote Ephesians he had realized the permanency of the human situation and regarded marriage as the most precious

26. Even though this letter to the Ephesians is perhaps not directly from the hand of Paul, nevertheless it reflects Paul's thought so faithfully in general that it can be considered "Pauline" for all practical purposes.
27. See Barclay, Letters, 70.
relationship within it, the only one which was even faintly parallel to the relationship of Christ and the Church. [ . . . ] Paul in this chapter looked on marriage as a second best because he believed that life as we know it had only days to run; but the day came when he saw it as the loveliest relationship upon earth. 29

5. DIVIDED VS. UNDIVIDED (vv.32-35)

a) "The affairs of the Lord." Paul says that the advantage of the celibate over the married man is that the celibate worries about "the affairs of the Lord" (ta tou kurioù). Two remarks of crucial importance must be made at this point, in order to forestall at the onset a possible distortion of the apostle's thought — a distortion which seems to be widespread in some sectors of the Church.

First, Paul does not say that the celibate is more attentive to the Lord himself, but merely that he is more concerned about the things or the affairs of the Lord. In other words, Paul is not talking about one's intimate relationship with the Lord as a friend, spouse, servant, etc., but only about one's degree of involvement in the interests of the Lord.

Secondly, Paul is referring here to Christ, not to God the Father. For indeed, the apostle regularly reserves the word kurios to the person of Jesus Christ, using the word theos when he wants to refer to God as distinct from Jesus Christ. 30 Notice that this important nuance seems to have escaped Jerome who, in his Latin translation of the Vulgate, correctly translates ta tou kurioù (v.32) into quae Domini sunt (= the things of the Lord), but then wrongly translates what follows "how to please the Lord" (tō kuriō, i.e. Christ) into "how to please God" (quomodo placeat DEO). This shift from Christ to God suggests that what is involved in the married state is not only a lesser freedom for the things of Christ, but a lesser personal commitment of one's heart to God! Hence the

29. See Barclay, Letters, 70.
30. See Murray J. Harris, Jesus as God. The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992) 122-24, 169, 295, and passim. For example, "it is generally true that in Paul ho kurios refers to Jesus Christ" (p. 295, n. 76).
unavoidable impression that the Christian commitment of the married person is necessarily, and somewhat by its very nature, partial and not therefore wholehearted. But this, of course, is unthinkable. As J. Gosling rightly remarks:

There cannot for a Christian be any half-dedication, and certainly not a vocation which explicitly falls short of going all the way. For already by baptism, this has been ruled out. By this sacrament we are consecrated to God, and called by him, not in part, not for some hours only in the week, not to give just a little of ourselves, but the whole man. By baptism we are taken over by God body and soul, and in accepting baptism we respond to this initiative, yielding ourselves to him in faith. We die to our old selves to rise with Christ; "when a man becomes a new creature in Christ, his old life has disappeared, everything has become new about him" (2 Cor 5:17). The whole tenor of our Lord's teaching emphasizes the unreserved response that he demands: a man cannot serve two masters, if he does not prefer Christ to all things he is not worthy of him and so on. There is no distinction made between the apostles, who are expected to give themselves wholly to Christ, and others, who only give themselves in driblets. [. . .] There may, of course, be various ways of giving oneself to God's service. Some of these may have advantages over others, but none of them can make that commitment more complete, even if some of them make it more quickly effective.\textsuperscript{31}

We must give all its weight to Paul's choice of words in these verses. A person who remains a celibate for religious motives can dedicate himself or herself more effectively — not to God, for indeed Paul never says this — but to some occupation which will require so much time and energy that fulfilling the duties of the married life would become problematic for such a person. One can surmise, here, that the itinerant vocation of an apostle like Paul, for instance, could perhaps represent such an occupation. Analogously, one can think that a comparable situation is mirrored in the institution of the seven deacons of the Jerusalem community (Acts 6): a division of labor is introduced so that some people (the

apostles) can dedicate themselves without distraction to "the things of the Lord," in this case to "prayer and the service of the word" (Acts 6:4).

In this connection, therefore, Paul seems justified in stating that, everything else being equal, the celibate is more available to "the things of the Lord" than the married man, especially if he has in mind, not an occasional period of service, but an entire career in the service of the Church, for example as an itinerant missionary or as a founder of Churches. Naturally, exceptions will always be found to this rule, and some existed among Paul's acquaintances: for instance, the apostle Peter, who presumably undertook missionary tours accompanied by his wife (1 Cor 9:5), the couple Prisca and Aquila, who came from Rome to Corinth and were Paul's helpers (Acts 18:1-3; 18:26; Rom 16:3-4; 1 Cor 16:19), the couple Junias and Andro-

32. "It seems unlikely that Paul could have meant this as a simple generalization, for unmarried persons would seem to become as perplexed about the affairs of the world as married people do. He more probably is referring to dedication of the whole life in a career, which is appropriate for Christians. An unmarried person could concentrate all his or her leisure time on special service to God, whereas the married person must concentrate a good part of his or her time on family needs." Cf. W. F. Orr and J. A. Walther, 1 Corinthians (Anchor Bible), (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976) 221.

In a similar vein various authors comment on the fact that Paul speaks of "tribulation" (thlipsis) in these verses (v.28). They see in this mention a veiled reference to forthcoming persecutions — a state of risk which is certainly easier to bear for the celibate than for the married Christian. Thus Jean-Jacques von Allmen writes: "In a time when there is a threat of persecution, for example (1 Cor 7:26 and 28), it can be an advantage not to be burdened with the further anxiety occasioned by the demands of the married state." Cf. Pauline Teaching on Marriage (London: Faith Press, 1963) 19.

Jose Maria Gonzalez Ruiz echoes the same views: "The word 'tribulation' (z'lipsis) has in Paul a strong flavor of apostolic dedication: the apostle — the militant — must undergo a certain number of 'tribulations' in order to build the Church. The apostolic 'tribulation' is a kind of heavy cement which forms the walls of this temple, which is being built through the action of the people of the Church. [.] In a word, the exhortation to celibacy was prompted by 'apostolic' motives: it is more convenient that there be 'professionals' of the apostolate who, free from any ties, can lead a life of 'perpetual risk,' as must be the life of an apostle: 'we live in a constant state of risk' (1 Cor 15:30)." Cf. El Evangelio de Pablo (Madrid: Marova, 1977) 67 — my translation.

nicus (Rom 16:7), and probably others too. Nevertheless, despite these exceptions Paul is probably right when he states that the unmarried person has an advantage over the married one when it comes to working full-time for “the things of the Lord,” such as the spread of the Gospel on foreign soil or even simply the founding of Churches.

However — and here a totally different set of considerations must be taken into account — it seems that, in other respects, the married state would represent an advantage even concerning “the affairs of the Lord.” For indeed, when it came to the pastoral service of the local Churches, the natural leader of the community was the married man, as we can surmise from Paul’s instructions to Timothy regarding the qualifications he should look for in appointing bishops (1 Tm 3:2-4) and deacons (1 Tm 3:12). A contemporary married theologian thus comments on this fact:

We see here that marriage and family life, far from being considered as distractions and obstacles to serving God in the Church wholeheartedly, are criterion for choosing the right people who could serve as bishops (i.e. community leaders) or deacons in the early Church. It suggests that those who have proven themselves to be good leaders in their own families are most likely going to be good leaders in bigger communities. The suggestion makes good sense, no doubt.33

In conclusion, I would tentatively summarize my findings at this point in this way: in Paul’s view celibacy is better than marriage if you happen to work full-time in a missionary capacity (as itinerant herald of the Word) or in other high-risk and/or particularly demanding occupations for the benefit of the Church. On the other hand, marriage would present an

33. See Jose M. de Mesa, “Marriage Is Discipleship,” East Asian Pastoral Review 28 (1991) 313-96. The quotation is found on p. 359. It could here be objected that the opinion that married men, including Peter, were better suited for pastoral service, is illegitimately reading back into New Testament times our present Status Quaestionis. However, the whole emphasis of J.-P. Audet (see reference in the next footnote), who happens to be an eminent specialist of that period of Church history, is to prove that such is not the case. I leave it to my reader to ponder Audet’s book and reach his or her own conclusions.
advantage in the case of service to the local Church as community leader or the like — presumably because, as J.-P. Audet has pointed out in a learned book on the matter,\textsuperscript{34} after the first Christians were rejected from the synagogue, "it came to be the home which inherited the totality of the life of the christian assembly,"\textsuperscript{35} thus giving the local ekklēsia the support of its hospitality, its link with the surrounding society, its framework for the spiritual growth of its members — a situation which lasted, according to Audet, "for more than two centuries without any major changes of form" (p. 63).

As a confirmation of this, it seems that, not only is marriage an advantage in the case of the pastoral service of the community, but that the community is served all the better that its married leaders are more deeply in love with their spouse! For indeed, such seems to be the meaning of the clause "husband of a single wife" (mias gunaikos anēr) which must characterize the married bishop or deacon (1 Tm 3:12; Ti 1:6). Here, contrary to a widespread understanding of these two passages (based on a faulty translation of them), Paul would not be referring to remarriage (for a widower) as an obstacle in pastoral service — something which would make little sense in itself — but rather to the undivided attachment that a good community leader should have for his wife.\textsuperscript{36} In his view, such a strong conjugal love could only favor the local Church. In other words, and paradoxically, the more intensely, a Christian is married, as it were, the better will he be able to take on "the things of the Lord!" We are far from a deprecation of marriage as compared to celibate life.

Perhaps we find here the reason why Jesus chose Peter, a married man (we are told he had a mother-in-law in Mk 1:29-34 par.), to be his first pope and vicar on earth. This choice


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid. 80.

\textsuperscript{36} Such is the meaning of the expression in both Jewish and pagan inscriptions of the time. See ibid. 58-61; Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible. Nouveau Testament (Paris: Cerf, 1972) 642; S. Lyonnet, "Unius uxoris vir (1 Tm 3,2.12; Tit 1,6)," Verbum Domini 45 (1967) 3-10.
is all the more significant that Jesus could well have chosen an unmarried man for this function, since there were probably some celibates among the apostles or the wider group of disciples. Apparently, in the eyes of Jesus at least, marriage did not result in “divided interests” (1 Cor 7:34) in Peter’s case. Even burdened with the care of the universal Church, married Peter could remain married (cf. again 1 Cor 9:5), yet still be “anxious about the affairs of the Lord.” Perhaps this was so because Jesus saw in him more the resident pastor of his ekklēsia than the itinerant preacher of his Gospel? Naturally, we are indulging in pure surmise here, but at least it elegantly reconciles Jesus’ choice of married Peter as his vicar with Paul’s preference for the celibate as one who can better take care of “the things of the Lord.”

b) Marriage and holiness. If the preceding analysis of Paul’s views is correct, then we can draw certain exegetical conclusions which will enable us to harmonize this passage of 1 Cor 7 with, for example, Vatican II’s teaching on the universal call to holiness and with the spirituality of marriage as a school of holiness.

10 The distinction between “the affairs of the Lord” (ta tou kuriou) and dedication to God, has already been explained. That distinction becomes crucial now with reference to our topic. For indeed, in the eyes of Paul marriage might constitute a certain disadvantage for certain forms of apostolate (worries about the “things of the Lord,” v.g. a life of an itinerant preacher), but he never says that marriage can hinder one’s perfect dedication to God. This fact should reassure the married Christians who try their best to find God in their proper vocation. For indeed, Paul is not presenting here a complete and balanced teaching on marriage itself as a way to holiness; he is merely evaluating marriage and celibacy in terms of their respective apostolic effectiveness. He ventures the opinion that celibacy presents certain advantages over marriage in this respect — and then, as I have tentatively suggested, only for some forms of apostolate, not even for all of these forms.

20 Not only is Paul not giving here a full theology of marriage, but in a sense he is intentionally limiting himself to a “wordly” view of marriage — the better to underscore
the apostolic effectiveness of celibacy in contrast to the "temporal" or "secular" side of marriage. This idea is well articulated by L. Legrand:

It may be said that this picture of matrimony is one-sided, that Christian matrimony is not only 'a thing of this world'. It has also reference to the world to come by its sacramental value. . . . It is clear that, to give a complete and balanced theological appraisal of matrimony, Paul should have said that it is in the measure in which it is not transformed by the divine agape that conjugal love divides the soul. He should have explained that for husband and wife the desire to please each other is wrong only if, and as far as, they represent for each other not Christ but the world with its devious judgments and seductions. But in 1 Cor 7, Paul does not intend to give a full theology of marriage . . . he simplifies his thought to express it more clearly, he considers only the 'worldly' aspect of married life . . .

37. The more positive aspects of marriage as a way of holiness are also part of Paul's views, and on occasion he develops them magnificently elsewhere (v.g. in Eph 5:21-23), showing how marriage is a relationship which "provides opportunities of its own for self-denial, unselfish affection, and religious growth." 38

40. The perspective of an imminent end of the world prevented Paul, when he wrote 1 Cor, from fully appreciating the more positive aspects of marriage, a defect which he corrected later on. 39

50. About the goal of the Christian life Vatican II (LG no. 40) teaches this: "It is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity."

These words of the Council provide an indirect confirmation of the exegesis of 1 Cor 7 proposed here. For indeed, how


38. See Moffat, First Epistle, 96.

could marriage as a vocation be reconciled with the universal call “to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity,” if marriage actually distracted the married Christians from the perfection of charity by “dividing their interests” (v.34)? It is therefore obvious that the “division of interests” contemplated here in no way detracts anything from the married Christians’ interest and commitment to God; it only prevents them from undertaking certain particularly demanding forms of apostolate, as I have suggested.

The previous consideration appears even more obvious if we stop a minute and ask ourselves: how could 99% of Christians be called to a vocation which would “divide their interests” in reference to God and His kingdom? At best, we could perhaps understand that 1% of strong personalities, endowed with a special grace to resist the lure of secular society, would be called to a vocation which would “divide their interests,” for they would be the tiny exception capable of overcoming such tremendous odds — but not the opposite.

Conclusion. As can be seen, Paul’s views on marriage and celibacy in 1 Cor 7 can make better sense when referred to a very definite sphere of Christian life, that of apostolic efficiency for certain specific tasks. But if we generalize them and apply them indiscriminately to the whole of Christian life, we end up with questionable conclusions.

III. THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

1. TEXT/TRANSLATION

In its Twenty-Fourth Session, on November 15 of the year 1563, the Council of Trent decreed the following Canon (Canon 10):

Si quis dixerit, statum conjugalem anteponendum esse statui virginitatis vel coelibatus, et non esse melius ac beatus manere in virginitate aut caelibatu, quam jungi matrimonio: anathema sit.

If anyone says that the married state surpasses that of virginity or celibacy, and that it is not better and happier to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be united in matrimony (cf. Mt 19:11f.;
1 Cor 7:25f., 38, 40), anathema sit.40

2. INTERPRETATION

a) Debates of the Council. When one wishes to understand well a particular decree of a past council, one should read in the Acts of that council the account of the debates which preceded the voting of that decree. Usually the various interventions of the Council Fathers, especially those of the officials (presiding legates, "relatores," general secretaries, presidents of theological commissions, etc.) will indicate the decree's meaning, its intent, its restrictions, etc.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the debates surrounding the above-quoted Canon 10 of the 24th Session of Trent, very little can be found in the debates themselves which can help us understand the exact meaning and intent of that canon. For indeed, from the Acts of the Council,41 we learn that, even though no less than 196 Fathers expressed themselves during the General Congregation held on November 11 of 1563, either by simply marking their agreement (placet) or disagreement (non placet) with the tenor of the 12 canons on the sacrament of marriage which were submitted to them, or by suggesting amendments, clarifications or explanations of these canons verbally or by writing — yet not a single word was said about Canon 10! Why? Perhaps it was because it presented no difficulty to the Fathers of the Council, at least nothing comparable to the difficulty of some of the other debated questions. In particular, during that General Congregation of November 11 the Fathers were vitally interested in the question of the validity of clandestine marriages, and the debates of that day were largely focused on that issue. I submit that Canon 10 received no mention precisely because of this reason: the attention of the Fathers was wholly centered on a more pastorally important issue.

However, despite this silence of the Fathers, we do find three clues in the Acts which, in this case, prove to be of decisive importance for a correct understanding of Canon 10. The first clue is found in the text (equally approved by the Council) which introduces the canons and decrees of that 24th Session on the sacrament of marriage. For indeed, in that introduction, entitled “Doctrine on the Sacrament of Marriage,” the Council refers clearly to the Protestant Reformers without, however, naming them. This is what it states:

Since . . . ungodly men of this age, raving madly, have not only formed false ideas concerning this venerable sacrament [of marriage], but, introducing in conformity with their habit under the pretext of the Gospel a carnal liberty, have by word and writing asserted, not without great harm to the faithful of Christ, many things that are foreign to the teaching of the Catholic Church and to the usage approved of since the times of the Apostles, this holy and general council, desiring to restrain their boldness, has thought it proper, lest their pernicious contagion should attract more, that the principal heresies and errors of the aforesaid schismatics (schismaticorum) be destroyed by directing against those heretics (haereticos) and their errors the following anathemas.42

The second and third clues reinforce the impression that these canons and decrees of the 24th Session were largely a response to the Protestant Reformers. The second clue is found in the intervention of Cardinal Charles of Lorraine, the archbishop of Rheims, who explicitly mentions Luther in connection with Canon 9.43 And the third clue is found in the intervention of the Patriarch of Venice, John Trivisano, who mentions Calvin in reference to the problem of clandestine marriages.44 Because of these three clues, it becomes important for us to know exactly the Reformers thought about marriage and celibacy, and what therefore constituted the theological context in which Canon 10 must be placed in order

43. See Ehses, ed., Concilii, 971.
44. Ibid. 972.
for it to be understood correctly.

b) *Statements of the Reformers.* The Protestant Reformers were unanimous in their rejection of clerical celibacy and of the religious state of consecrated celibacy.

Martin Luther, for example, firmly believed that clerical celibacy was contrary to nature, for the simple reason that it did not take into account the irresistible power of concupiscence. In his views, only a very special grace of God could justify a person for taking on a life of celibacy, and the vast majority of clerics, monks and nuns, who were living under religious vows, had not received the charism of celibacy (hence, according to his estimation, their almost universal lack of chastity) and should not continue to remain in their contrary-to-nature state. In fact, it was their duty to abandon their celibacy and marry like everybody else. In his own words: "It is certainly obvious that these human laws forbidding the marriage of priests are really not the laws of man but of the devil."45 Elsewhere the Reformer, writing on this premise, concludes: "No one, therefore, is in duty bound to keep this commandment [i.e. the Church law enforcing clerical and religious celibacy], and the pope is responsible for all the sins committed against this ordinance, for all the souls lost thereby, and for all the consciences thereby confused and tortured."46

Another Protestant Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, shared Luther's views. Thus, in his *Dispute of Zurich* (1523), he defends Luther's theses on marriage (Theses 28, 29 and 30). In his thesis 29 he writes: "Those who are popularly called ecclesiastics or spirituals (geistlich) sin if, having realized that God has refused them [the gift of] chastity, do not take a woman and do not marry." In his thesis 30 he writes: "Those who make the vow of chastity are the slaves of an insane presumption and of a childish arrogance. Accordingly, those who demand or accept such vows commit an injustice towards them and tyrannize the simple folk."47

46. Ibid. 889.
For his part, John Calvin writes in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (IV, 13): "Surely the forbidding of marriage to priests came about by an impious tyranny not only against God's Word but also against all equity . . . the prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of demons."  

Bearing in mind this strong rejection of celibacy on the part of the Reformers, let us now examine Canon 10 of Trent's 24th Session and see how, by referring it to the Protestant theses on celibacy, we can gain a better understanding of it. 

**c) Relevance to the text of Trent.** Here, in order to reassure my reader that I am not merely projecting my own understanding of the celibacy issue on the Council's pronouncements, I will merely quote a professional historian's interpretation of the canon, that of Gervais Dumeige, S.J. This is what he writes:

The first clause [of Canon 10] does not directly assert that the state of virginity-celibacy is superior to that of marriage, but condemns the Protestant theory which presented the state of marriage as preferable and as the only normal one for fallen man laboring under concupiscence.

The meaning of the second clause is less clear. But if we take into account the Protestant assertions against which the canon is opposed, it would refer to those who have already committed themselves to the state of virginity or celibacy, as that state is proposed, approved and lived out in the Catholic Church. They do not have to leave that state of life, whatever its difficulties. To remain in it (*manere*) is for them what is better (*melius*) and more blessed (*beatius*).  

If we recapitulate our findings at this point, we can draw two conclusions from our analysis. First, the Council says that marriage is *not superior* to celibacy — at least not superior to the point that a cleric or a religious should abandon his


state and get married. Naturally, the temptation for many people is to conclude from this that, if marriage is not superior to celibacy, it is because it is inferior to it. But this conclusion does not necessarily follow. For indeed, a third logical alternative could be that celibacy and marriage are of equal value, neither one being inferior to the other, but each one being perhaps complementary to the other one. Naturally, this reading of Trent goes far beyond what the Council actually said or even had in mind. Yet, such a reading would not contradict Trent and should perhaps be given consideration, because at no time does the Council say that celibacy is superior to marriage. What it merely says is that celibacy is not inferior to marriage, nothing more.

Secondly, the Council says that celibates should remain in their chosen state of life, since it is a perfectly legitimate one. In other words, they do not have to leave their state of celibacy in order to become better Christians or in order to obey the commandments of God. If it is their vocation to be celibates, it is better for them to remain such. Just as, if it is the vocation of other Christians to be married, then it is equally better for these other Christians to remain such.

Given the preceding clarifications, we are now in a position to return to our starting point and to read our Canon 10 with the new understanding we have gained from a recourse to its historical context. Consequently, the canon now reveals its full meaning — a meaning which I take the liberty of spelling out by adding explanatory brackets to the Council’s original text, which therefore could read somewhat like this:

If anyone says [as did the Reformers] that the married state surpasses that of virginity or celibacy, and that it is not better and happier to remain in virginity or celibacy than to [abandon vowed celibacy and] be united in matrimony, anathema sit.

IV. ADDED REFLECTIONS

To the preceding analyses of the biblical-conciliary data, I will now suggest a few brief considerations which will hopefully throw further light on our topic.
1. A celibate preserve. As we all know, this topic of celibacy, along with many other theological topics, was treated almost exclusively by celibates in the course of history. In the case of Paul, he clearly asserts that he was not married when he wrote First Corinthians (1 Cor 7:7-8). Whether he had ever been married before that and was, therefore, either separated from his wife or a widower when he wrote First Corinthians, remains a disputed question. After Paul, all the orthodox authors who wrote on celibacy were, as far as I know, celibates themselves: the Church Fathers, the theologians throughout the centuries, and the members of the Church hierarchy.

2. A celibate bias. A consequence of this massive fact is to be expected because it is too natural to be avoidable. That consequence is that those celibates who wrote and taught on celibacy had a certain "bias" in favor of the way of life they had embraced and practiced for a certain number of years. Since they had chosen celibacy instead of marriage, one can reasonably presume that they probably held celibacy in higher esteem than marriage — at least as their own preferred way to God, if not in absolute theory. But the distance between personal preference and value judgments in general is very short, as we all know by personal experience. On the other hand, not having a direct experience of marriage as a way to God, these Church Fathers and theologians could hardly be expected to see the advantages of marriage as a way to God as clearly as they could see (through their own personal

50. Some authors were intrigued by this possibility already in the last century. See, e.g., J. H. Wilkinson, "Was St. Paul Married?", The Expository Times, 5th series, 5 (1897) 436-42. Later on, J. Jeremias tried to prove that Paul was a widower. See, e.g., his two articles: "War Paulus Witwer?", Zeitschrift für die Neuestamentliche Wissenschaft 25 (1926) 310-12, and "Nochmals: War Paulus Witwer?", 28 (1929) 321-23. But many authors are not convinced by the merely circumstantial evidence brought forward by Jeremias. See, among others, Legrand, "St. Paul and Celibacy," 427-50, esp. 429-33. This author concludes: "One is reduced to conjecture . . . No doubt the problem presents too many unknown factors to be capable of a solution" (p. 433). An opinion which reflects the scepticism of many, such as Audet (cf. Structures, p. 69). The latter inclines, however, to see Paul as a celibate: "His 'instruction', as we read it in 1 Cor 7, does make better sense on the hypothesis that he had never been married. Furthermore, everything else that we know about him seems to lead to the same conclusion. This is all that history can tell us."
experience) the advantages of celibacy as a way to God. In fact, from their particular standpoint as celibates, they were probably more likely to see the inconveniences of marriage as a way to God in comparison with celibacy. The same reasoning, of course, is applicable to the married persons who would have written on the relationship celibacy-marriage. However, since there were virtually no married persons who expressed themselves on this topic in the course of the centuries (I am referring here to Church Fathers and theologians), and therefore no contrary point of view offered, the weight of opinions was singularly tilted to one side of the scale. Hence the constant mutual reinforcement of pro-celibacy testimonies in the course of tradition, an almost complete absence of pro-marriage testimonies by married theologians and, more seriously, a preconditioned reading of the relevant Bible texts, or, as I said earlier, a certain “bias” in favor of a celibate understanding of the texts.

A curious example of this “preconditioning” is found in Vatican II. For indeed, despite the fact that Lumen gentium had specified that “all faithful are called to the perfection of charity” (no. 11), nevertheless the Council Fathers managed to have the decree for the religious entitled Perfectae caritatis!

3. Some clarifications. The pro-celibate bias which subconsciously was at work in the Council resulted in a decree on religious life which extolled the religious persons to such heights that the decree could easily be misunderstood as a practical revocation of Lumen gentium’s doctrine (voted the year before) on the universal call to holiness. In a commentary on Chapter IV of Lumen gentium (the chapter dealing with religious life), Gustave Thils acknowledges this danger: “It is not easy to describe the characteristics of the religious state. What one will say concerning the greatness and the nobility of the religious state could be understood as a monopolization of all the beauties of the Christian condition for the benefit of the religious alone.”

51 In order to obviate such a misinterpretation of Perfectae caritatis, the theological commission

which prepared the decree accepted in this connection the following principle of interpretation: everything in the decree that was said about the religious was said positively and not exclusively; it is therefore possible for a Christian to embody the characteristics of religious life (consecration, sign, witness, etc.) under another form, in another state of life, and thus attain in that state the perfection of charity and holiness, according to the specific path and means of that state. In other words, no. 44 of Perfectae caritatis describes how the religious are consecrated, signs, witnesses, etc. in their own way, and not to the exclusion of the other states of life.52

A similar clarification is offered by a married theologian, Jose de Mesa. The latter’s starting point is the fact that, during the preparatory phase of Lumen gentium, an earlier version of that Constitution’s fifth chapter, which said that “undivided love” and “dedication to God alone” must be seen as the real characteristics of religious celibacy, was rejected. Jose de Mesa has the following comment on this fact:

This competitive opposition between love of God and love of a fellow human being (including sexual love) was deliberately rejected. The definitive text runs: ‘That precious gift of divine grace which the Father gives to some people . . . so that by virginity, or celibacy, they can more easily devote their entire selves to God alone with undivided heart’. Virginity or celibacy helps some to offer God their undivided hearts. Not all, though. Others may be helped rather by marriage to give God their undivided hearts. This, of course, implies that all Christians owe God an undivided love. Some do so as married, others as religious or as single persons. After all, the exhortation to love God above all things with our whole heart, whole soul, whole mind and whole strength, is addressed to all Christians, not just to a select few. Lumen Gentium 42 concedes that total and undivided dedication to God is the calling of all Christians.53

Understood in this flexible way, the text of Lumen gentium 42 indirectly confirms the exegesis of 1 Cor 7 which I defended

52. On this important precision, see the clarification provided by G. Thils in Cardinal Duval et al., ibid. 203.
53. See de Mesa, “Marriage Is Discipleship,” 386.
in the second part of this article.

In another vein, while many celibates have written on the inconveniences of marriage in terms of a greater freedom of movement in the apostolate, a greater leisure for the conduct of a regular prayer life, an easier access to an experience of immediate intimacy with God in the contemplative life, etc., nevertheless let it be said that this view of marriage is partial. Had the married Christians been given the opportunity, in the course of the centuries, to express themselves on their own lived experiences, the so-called “superiority” of celibacy over married life would not have been so obvious to the celibates. For these, then, would perhaps have been brought to see what so many married couples see (and are beginning to express in recent books and articles) in their own lives as positive advantages of the married state for a different (and equally valuable) type of apostolic service, prayer life, experience of God, etc.

To take only one example, where obviously the celibates are at a “disadvantage” in a certain sense, many couples can testify that their sexual life is often a venue for a deep experience of God. As a married man, theologian Thomas Hart can write on this delicate topic from the depth of his own experience:

It could probably be said that married people should expect some of the more important religious experiences of their lives in bed. That may sound blasphemous to some ears. It is not what we usually hear in church. But does that not show how far we have separated religion and life? Isn’t it God who has designed this whole thing we call sex, giving us the capacity, the desire, and the fulfillment? The idea is his, and surely it is a great gift to us . . . . He is in the gift he gives and that is why we can say that sex will mediate the experience of God. . . . If God is love, he must be present where human love is most powerfully spoken.54

Naturally, this protest against reducing lovemaking in marriage to a mere “remedium concupiscentiae” is repeated nowadays by many thoughtful Christians. Richard Westley, for example,

stresses in an important article the fact that sexual activity in marriage is integral to authentic spirituality.\textsuperscript{55}

In other respects, too, married couples could show how, in a thousand small ways, their state of life is every bit as sacrificial and selfless as that of any religious, and in that connection could hardly be thought of as "inferior" by those who have a real experience of the married state. Again, Thomas Hart's description of this phenomenon strikes the right note:

The married state, far from being a backwater in the Church for those who cannot brave the currents of real sanctification, is a superb context for growth in Christian holiness. Its demands for selflessness are constant, whether they come from one's spouse, the children, or others who come and go. Marriage is a life-project which requires a great deal of trust in the goodness and care of God in constantly changing and sometimes downright frightening circumstances. It is a setting to which God's call and invitation and even his judgment have ready access through all the human channels so closely surrounding the individual.\textsuperscript{56}

In like manner, if we judge by the impressive list of apostolic tasks assigned by Vatican II to the married Christians, we can begin to wonder if the age-old claim that celibacy offers better opportunities for apostolic work is still valid. For indeed, apart from being a witness and an educator of the faith, the family provides active hospitality and promotes justice and other good works for the brethren in need. Among the multiple activities of the family apostolate may be enumerated the following: the adoption of abandoned children, hospitality to strangers, assistance in the operation of schools, helpful advice and material assistance for adolescents, help to engaged couples in preparing themselves better for marriage, catechetical work, support of married couples and families involved in material and moral crises, help for the aged not only by providing them with the necessities of life but also by obtaining for them a fair share of the benefits

\textsuperscript{56} See Hart, \textit{Living Happily}, 89-90.
of economic progress.\textsuperscript{57}

Again, viewed on the background of this description of the family apostolate, Paul's characterization of marriage as distorting from "the things of the Lord" and thus dividing the couple's interests and hindering them from devotion to the Lord (1 Cor 7:32-35), hardly does justice to present-day family life as it is lived by numerous couples. Indeed, if a Christian family fulfills its role of being a "domestic Church" (LG no. 11), it is difficult to see how marriage in this respect can be a distraction from "the things of the Lord" if to build a family is to build a mini-Church.

My final reflection will deal with the eschatological dimension of both celibacy and marriage. It is often said that one of the reasons why celibacy is superior to marriage is that celibacy is an anticipation, a proleptic affirmation of our final state in the full kingdom of God, since those who will belong to that final age "neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Lk 20:35). That, of course, is quite true as far as it goes. In this respect, celibacy is indeed superior to marriage as an eschatological sign of our \textit{individual state} in the consummated kingdom of God. And this insight is very well expressed by Pope John Paul II when he writes: "In virginity or celibacy, the human being is awaiting, also in a bodily way, the eschatological marriage of Christ with the Church, giving himself or herself completely to the Church in the full truth of eternal life. The celibate person thus anticipates in his or her own flesh the new world of the future resurrection."\textsuperscript{58}

However, the kingdom of God is also the final age when the \textit{marriage} of Christ with his Bride the Church will take place (see Rv 19:5-9; 21:9-22:5). In this respect, might it not be said that marriage is superior to celibacy as an eschatological sign of our \textit{communitarian state} as the People of God. Using thus the \textit{analogia fidei}, as it were, could we not propose the following reasoning:

\textsuperscript{57} See the Decree \textit{Apostolicam actuositatem}, no. 11, in Walter M. Abbott, S.J., \textit{The Documents of Vatican II} (New York: America Press, 1966) 503. All other quotations of Vatican II in this article are taken from this edition.

\textsuperscript{58} John Paul II, \textit{Familiaris consortio}, no. 16.
— if present celibacy prefigures the future (eschatological) celibacy of the individual elect in heaven,
— then present marriage prefigures the future (eschatological) marriage of the Church to Christ in heaven.

In line, therefore, with the Pope’s statement, we might pursue his reasoning somewhat in the following vein: “Likewise, in marriage the Christian couples already symbolize and anticipate, also in a bodily way, the eschatological marriage of Christ with the Church, giving themselves completely to the Church in the full truth of eternal life. The married persons thus anticipate in their bodily union the new world of the future resurrection.”

CONCLUSION

My purpose throughout this essay has been to show that the traditional loci that served as proof-texts to demonstrate the superiority of celibacy over marriage could lend themselves to an altogether different (and perhaps better) interpretation. The reader will have to decide by himself or herself whether or not I have succeeded in my undertaking. If ever I have, then perhaps it might seem advisable to the Magisterium of the Church to seek for a more solid foundation for its oft-repeated affirmation of celibacy’s superiority, or better still in my modest opinion, revise its doctrine in this respect by completing it with some helpful distinctions. For instance, it could say something like this: “Whereas celibacy is demonstrably superior to marriage in some respects, on the other hand a closer examination of the experience of married couples shows that marriage is superior to celibacy in other respects.” If the Magisterium decided to undertake such an enlargement of its traditional position, then presumably the overall conclusion of all this would be that, just as fruits and meat are very different kinds of food and yet complementary to each other in a well-balanced diet, so also celibacy and marriage are in a similar relationship to one another, each one being the perfect complement of the other, neither one being superior to the other in any absolute sense of the word.

I found an ancient witness to this view in a beautiful text
of a 4th century bishop, St. Amphilochnius of Iconium, who was very esteemed as a theologian by no less than St. Basil the Great. This is what Amphilochnius writes:

Virginity is wonderful . . . but marriage is also precious. It surpasses every earthly gift, it is a tree from which comes great fruit . . . In no way do I desire to create a conflict between virginity and marriage, for I admire both as indebted to one another. The Providence of God has decreed that the one must not be pitted against the other. The true service of God embraces both. Without love of God neither marriage nor virginity is holy.59

It is difficult to add to this balanced appraisal of both celibacy and marriage. Hopefully, such a view will prevail in the years to come.

59. I came across this text in the book of Charles P. Kindregan, A Theology of Marriage. A doctrinal, moral, and legal study (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1967) 7, footnote 5. Kindregan presents it as an excerpt from a work entitled “In Honor of Virginity, Marriage and Widowhood.” However, upon looking more closely into the matter, I found this text under the heading, “Homilia De occursu Domini” (Homily on the Meeting of the Lord), in Vol. 39 of Migne’s Patrologia Graeca, col. 44-45. I have also taken the liberty of improving the English translation of Kindregan (or, more probably, of his unnamed source) whenever it strayed too far from the Greek.