IS CELIBACY BETTER? A HISTORIAN’S REPLY TO NIL GUILLEMETTE

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In the previous issue of Landas, Fr. Nil Guillemette has challenged the traditional Scriptural texts used by the magisterium in its repeated affirmation that the state of Christian celibacy is superior to that of marriage, as the constant tradition of the Church has maintained. His avowed purpose — a legitimate one — is to analyze particularly the two texts cited by the Council of Trent and by subsequent documents up to and including John Paul II’s Familiaris consortio. His conclusion is that neither of these New Testament texts provide such support.¹

Though Guillemette writes as a New Testament scholar, in fact he goes on to interpret the Council of Trent’s anathema against those who deny that it is better to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be joined in marriage. Likewise with a brief generalization he devalues the whole patristic tradition on virginity and marriage.² Finally, some “Added Reflections” take him far beyond the professed exegesis of the traditional texts on celibacy, for which the article was written, to an argument on celibacy itself.

This reply will not discuss at any length the exegesis of the New Testament texts, as it is clear to all modern exegetes, as Guillemette shows, that in 1 Cor 7:25-40 Paul is speaking in the expectation of a proximate Parousia rather than giving norms for general Christian life. (That is not to say that the text is totally irrelevant, but to determine its direct import.)

Concerning his other text, however, it may be noted in passing

2. Ibid. 25-32.
that the commentators on Mt 19:10-12 in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* as well as in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, contrary to Guillemette, maintain the traditional interpretation of “eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven,” and make no reference to any contrary interpretation.³

We should also take some account here of the historical validity of Guillemette’s passing remark:

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.⁴

Not only may the assertion “highly regarded” be questioned, but there is little likelihood that the audience to whom Jesus spoke in Palestine had ever heard of the Vestal Virgins. Nor can the enforced celibacy placed on these six-year old girls for thirty years have any but a grotesque resemblance to the celibacy freely undertaken for the Kingdom of God which Jesus preached.⁵ Even the celibacy of the Essenes isolated at Qumran may not have been known to all Jews — it is significant they never appear in the Gospels. If indeed it was known, scholars are still cautious as to making any definitive statements about it. John L. McKenzie in the JBC considered it to have been a temporary state.⁶ More recently, Raymond E. Brown in an assessment of the contradictory evidence, concludes that “[p]robably one group . . . did practice celibacy, at least for periods of their life . . . but the rest were married.”⁷ Such a basis for the celibacy Jesus preached seems very thin.

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6. JBC, 43:132.
THE PATRISTIC TRADITION

After raising a doubt as to whether Paul might have been a widower rather than celibate, Guillemette recognizes in a footnote that "many authors are not convinced by the merely circumstantial evidence brought forward by Jeremias [in 1926]." Joseph Fitzmyer puts it more strongly, affirming that "almost every point in this intriguing view is dubious." Guillemette, however, continues:

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.

One could at this point provide some lurid examples in most centuries from both the Church hierarchy and the theologians to cast doubt on that supposed fact of universal practice of celibacy by those who wrote in favor of it. We shall concern ourselves here, however, only with the patristic tradition. There is no question — and Guillemette does not raise any — that the orthodox patristic tradition, as far as individual Fathers wrote at all on the subject, is unanimous in supporting celibacy for the Kingdom of God as a higher state than marriage. No doubt this is principally due to the fact that the New Testament texts Guillemette has questioned seemed to the Fathers clearly to affirm it. Guillemette concludes, however, that this universal tradition is without value, since

those celibates [the orthodox Fathers] who wrote and taught on celibacy had a certain 'bias' in favor of the way of life they had embraced and practiced for a number of years.

The logic of that statement will not be obvious to everyone, especially since later in the article Guillemette quotes two married theologians, Jose de Mesa and Thomas N. Hart, whose

10. Ibid.
lack of bias against celibacy he takes for granted, never even raising the caution he had alleged concerning the supposed bias of the Fathers: "the distance between personal preference and value judgments in general is very short as we all know by personal experience." One can see no reason why this presumption of bias might not equally apply to married theologians. This is clearly an unjustified double standard.

Moreover, Guillemette’s generalization ignores the possibility, even strong probability, that those Fathers who chose celibacy for the Kingdom as a higher way of life did so precisely because they already understood this to be the teaching of Jesus, and felt themselves called to it. No doubt a deeper experience of celibacy strengthened the convictions expressed in their writings, but years of experience were not necessarily or even probably the reason for choosing their way of life in the first place. The convictions were the cause, not the effect of their choice.

THE FACTS OF CELIBACY/VIRGINITY IN THE PATRISTIC ERA

The first extant mention of Christian celibacy — i.e., celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God — is to be found already in the first century in the letter of the church of Rome to the church of Corinth (c. 95 A.D.). The author of the letter, Clement, is writing an exhortation to the church of Corinth, particularly cautioning them against jealousy, which he declares to have been the principal reason for their unlawfully deposing the elders (presbyteroi) who ruled the local church. In this exhortatory letter, he calls on each member of the community to help others with the gifts that God has given to him/her. After speaking of wisdom, humility, and other gifts, he continues:

He who is continent [en te sarki enkratein] must not put on airs. He must recognize that his self-control is a gift from another. (1 Clem 38:2).  

It is evident from the text that there were Christians, probably

11. Ibid. 73-74.
lay, living a life of celibacy, which Clement considered to be a great gift of God, and which he implied was much esteemed in the Christian community. However, he cautions the celibate, as Ignatius of Antioch would do shortly thereafter, that the gift of celibacy is no reason “to put on airs.” Presumably what is meant by putting on airs is for the one gifted with the charism of celibacy to consider him/herself equal or superior to the institutional hierarchy of presbyteroi/episkopoi. Clement gives us no reason to think that he was celibate himself; rather, he insinuates that there is a difference between those of charismatic gifts, like celibacy, and those who, like himself, held authority as presbyteroi. Moreover, he is writing only a decade after the exhortation of 1 Timothy that a bishop (episkopos) should be “a man of one wife” (1Tim 3:2).\(^{13}\) Surely this text implies that in normal cases the episkopoi/presbyteroi and the monoepiskopoi into which they would eventually evolve, will be married men, not necessarily or even probably celibates, as Guillemette presumes.

A decade or so after Clement, this time in Asia Minor, we find the beginning of the monoepiscopate in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, letters written to various churches he had passed through while he was being taken to Rome to be executed. The evidence of a group of Christians dedicated to a life of celibacy is much the same, but there are a number of precisions made here, which were only implicit or suggested in Clement.

The key text is from the letter of Ignatius to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, whose hospitality Ignatius had enjoyed on his painful journey. Characteristically forthright, Ignatius gives his younger colleague advice on various problems of the local church. Coming to marriage he says:

Tell my sisters to love the Lord and to be altogether contented with their husbands. Similarly, urge my brothers in the name of Jesus

13. One should note here, of course, that both Clement and his addressees, as well as the author of 1 Tim are speaking of a member of the colleges of episkopoi/presbyteroi, by which the churches were all still ruled. It would thus be an anachronism to call Clement pope, since it would be another fifty years before Rome (or Corinth) was ruled by a monoepiskopos.
Christ “to love their wives as the Lord loves the Church.” If anyone can live in chastity *[en agneia menein]* for the honor of the Lord’s flesh *[eis timen tou Kuriou tes sarkos]*, let him do so without ever boasting. If he boasts of it, he is lost; and if he is more highly honored than the bishop, his chastity is as good as forfeited.\(^{14}\)

There are several points that deserve to be noted here. First, for Ignatius celibacy is clearly a gift of the Lord. Second, the gift of celibacy is seen as a gift for which one should strive if called to it. Third, in a way which Clement did not, he gives as its motive the “honor of the flesh of the Lord.” This is especially significant in that Ignatius comes from Antioch in Syria, where shortly afterward, under the leadership of Tatian, celibacy would be promoted, not to honor the flesh of the Lord, but because the flesh was seen as essentially evil — En克拉atism; with its resulting Docetism — the denial that Jesus really possessed a human body. Fourth, Ignatius repeats even more emphatically that for all the praise he gives to the charm of celibacy, it would be totally nullified by pride, above all if it were opposed to the hierarchical authority.

Though it is, of course, impossible to have certainty on the matter, both the reason given by Clement and the tone of Ignatius’ remarks imply that he and other *episkopoi/presbyteroi* or *monoepiskopoi* were married men. At a time when clear lines of authority were just beginning to be established in a largely charismatic church, both men are indeed understandably cautious about the relationship between charism and authority. But in both the case of Clement and that of Ignatius, we find rather


It should be noted that the Greek words translated here by “chastity,” “purity,” like “continence” above, refer not to married chastity, but to abstention from sexual relations. The same is true of the similar Greek words in the quotation from Justin below. See G.W.H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 20, 402-3, 277; s.v.
than bias against celibacy, a high esteem for it, on the part of two Fathers whom we have good reason to think were themselves married men.

The ascetic movement continued to grow in the second century, to such an extent that the Apologists will point to the existence of celibacy among Christians as one of the proofs of their high moral character. Justin, writing in mid-second century, is the most eloquent on the subject.

Many men and women now in their sixties and seventies who have been disciples of Christ from childhood have preserved their purity [aphthoroi]; and I am proud to say that I could point to such people in every nation. (1 Apol., 15).  

THE DE VIRGINITATE OF GREGORY OF NYSSA

By the fourth century, celibacy was achieving its greatest esteem. Not to speak of the phenomenal growth of monasticism in the East, and somewhat later — as a result of the translation into Latin of Athanasius’ life of Anthony — in the West, there was an increasing movement to connect celibacy with clerical life. The famous synod of Elvira in Spain in 306 was perhaps the first legislation demanding married priests to live in continence with their wives, though it was a purely local synod and perhaps something of an aberration.  

Nonetheless, as the century went on there were an increasing number of treatises on virginity. But married bishops continued to be taken for granted in the fourth century, as we may see

15. Richardson, Early Christian Fathers, 250; PG 6:349. It may be noted that Justin does not think of comparing Christian celibacy/virginity to Vestal Virgins, Therapeutae, or others who had only a superficial analogy to Christian celibacy.
16. Scholars today generally consider the story by the historian Sozomen of an effort to impose clerical celibacy at the Council of Nicaea, and the alleged plea of Abbot Paphnutius not to place such a yoke on the secular clergy, to be at best dubious, and very likely legendary. See Leo Donald Davis, S.J., The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787); Their History and Theology (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987) 65; also J. Gribomont, “Paphnutius,” Encyclopedia of the Early Church, ed. Angelo di Berardino, tr. Adrian Walford (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 2:646.
17. For a conspectus of some of the more prominent of these, see the introduction by Michel Aubineau, the editor and translator of Gregoire de Nyssae, Traité de la Virginité (Sources Chrétiennes, no. 119; Paris: Cerf, 1966) 23-25.
from Gregory of Nazianzus succeeding his own father as bishop of that town, to give only one well-known example.\textsuperscript{18}

All of the Cappadocian Fathers made their own contributions to this exaltation of virginity and monastic life. But the outstanding and most extensive treatise of the century was the \textit{De Virginitate} of Gregory of Nyssa. What is relevant to our purpose here is that the consensus among patristic scholars, both from external and internal evidence, is that the author of this panegyric on virginity was himself a married man. Certainly he cannot fall under the supposition of Guillemette that the Fathers, because of their being celibate, were unable to appreciate marriage as a way to God.\textsuperscript{19}

That is not to say that there are no historical problems to establishing with certainty the marriage of Gregory of Nyssa. As his editor Aubineau notes, apologetic intentions from both the Catholic and the Protestant side have often influenced historians on the question. He outlines at considerable length the three main lines of argumentation (including the question of a supposed child of Gregory). After considering the evidence in detail, though rejecting some of the arguments of Jean Daniélov, “l’incomparable pionnier des études nysséennes,” he concludes simply that he agrees with Daniélov that Gregory was indeed married. As his most convincing argument in the end he cites the third chapter of \textit{De Virginitate}, which deserves to be quoted at length.\textsuperscript{20}

After two introductory chapters on the reasons why he should write on virginity, Gregory continues:

Would indeed that some profit might come to myself from this effort! I should have undertaken this labour with the greater readiness, if I could have hope of sharing, according to the Scripture, in the fruits of the plough and the threshing-floor; the toil would then have been


\textsuperscript{19} Quasten states simply that “he became a teacher of rhetoric and married.” But he adds that later under the influence of Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, he entered a monastery (p. 54). Nothing is said of what happened to his wife, but as Aubineau points out, in the customs of the times, nothing prevented the bishop from continuing to live with his wife (Aubineau, \textit{Traité}, 75).

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Traité de la Virginité}, 65-77. The quote on Daniélov is on p. 75, as is Aubineau’s conclusion on the topic.
a pleasure. As it is, this my knowledge of the beauty of virginity is in some sort vain and useless to me... Happy they who have still the power of choosing the better way, and have not debarred themselves from it by engagements of the secular life, as we have, whom a gulf now divides from glorious virginity; no one can climb up to that who has once planted his foot upon the secular life. We are but spectators of others' blessings and witnesses to the happiness of another class. Even if we strike out some fitting thoughts about virginity, we shall not be better than the cooks and scullions who provide sweet luxuries for the tables of the rich, without having any portion themselves in what they prepare. What a blessing it had been otherwise, if we had not to learn the good by after-regrets!...

Amid the plethora of metaphors and some rhetorical exaggeration, the message is clear. For Gregory, celibacy is the higher state, but however much he may praise it, he can never reach it again — because of his marriage when he was a rhetoric teacher. Here is one Father who cannot be accused of a bias against marriage because he had already chosen celibacy earlier.

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

Having dealt with the relevant New Testament texts, Guillemette takes up Canon 10 of the Twenty-Fourth Session of the Council of Trent. Since in doing so he has moved from his avowed purpose of examining the Scriptural texts cited in favor of the superiority of celibacy to the married state, we have altered the order of our treatment from his. For we may be certain that a key factor in making such a declaration by the Council would be the uninterrupted tradition of the orthodox Fathers, particularly in their understanding of the New Testament texts. Hence our prior treatment of the patristic tradition has considerable relevance.

Nonetheless, let us follow Guillemette's treatment of the canon

22. See Guillemette, "Is Celibacy Better?" 31. Gregory does have some of the commonplaces about the miseries of the married state, though not in the vein of Jerome's disgusting diatribe a century later.
in question. It reads:

Si quis dixerit, statum conjugalem anteponendum esse statui virginitatis vel caelibatus, et non esse melius ac beatius 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.23

As Guillemette points out, a major difficulty in interpreting this canon is that nothing can be found in the debates at the Council concerning this canon. Other canons, such as that on clandestine marriages, went through prolonged and acrimonious debates, but from the silence on this one, it seems legitimate to conclude that there was nothing controversial in it for the Fathers. Guillemette points out several clues that the canon was directed against the Protestant reformers, a conclusion which may be readily admitted.24 Based on this, he emphasizes that

it becomes important for us to know what exactly the Reformers thought about marriage and celibacy, and what therefore constituted the theological context in which Canon 10 must be placed in order for it to be understood correctly.25

Unfortunately that is not so simple a problem to resolve. Moreover, perhaps it is more important to know, as far as that could be determined, what the Fathers thought the Protestants held. In any case, the Reformers, like most thinkers, underwent considerable evolution in their opinions, nor did what they said, especially in polemic writings, always correspond either to their own thought or to the truth.

The treatment of Luther is symptomatic. Guillemette, drawing

25. Ibid. 27-28.
from an anthology of Luther’s opinions, gives two quotations, which affirm the right or duty of celibates to abandon their vows which have been forced on them. Guillemette sums up the quotations, saying:

Martin Luther . . . 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 view, only a very special grace of God could justify a person for taking on a life of celibacy, and the majority of clerics, monks, and nuns, who were living under religious vows, had not received the charm of celibacy. . . .

The quotations being summed up here actually come from Luther’s 1520 tract, “Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in which he calls on the princes to throw off Roman temporal authority, and do away with the abuses perpetrated by the pope for financial reasons. The abuses of obligatory celibacy are merely an instance of such abuses, and Luther at this point is only on the verge of breaking with Catholic doctrine and the papacy.

The texts actually quoted by Guillemette are perhaps more violent in language, but in substance hardly go beyond the many denunciations of obligatory celibacy to be found in relatively respectable Catholic periodicals today. Nor do they, at this stage of Luther’s development, attack celibacy in itself, as Guillemette has concluded. Moreover, earlier in the same treatise, Luther not only allows that Jesus had called for [voluntary] celibacy, but actually quotes in support at least one of the two New Testament texts with which Guillemette started his article by denying their traditional meaning. Luther writes:

I advise what seems good to me, let him reject it who will. I see for myself how the vows are kept, especially the vow of chastity. This vow has become universal in these monasteries, and yet it was never commanded by Christ. On the contrary, chastity is given to

28. The full text may be found, among other places, in Selected Writings of Martin Luther, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 1:251-353.
very few, as he himself says [Matt. 19:11-12], as well as St. Paul [1 Cor. 7:7]. It is my heartfelt wish for everyone to be helped. I do not want to let Christian souls get entangled in the self-contrived traditions and laws of men.

As may be seen here, Luther does not totally reject celibacy as an evangelical counsel, though given the purpose of his polemic, he places more emphasis than other writers on the fewness of those to whom the charism of celibacy is given by Jesus. As he became more alienated from the Church, his language would be more rash and often disgusting in its exaggerations. Moreover, as he developed his theology of justification by faith alone, he would see celibacy at its best as merely one of those "good works," like fasting or pilgrimages, which availed nothing toward justification.

Zwingli's position is much easier to deal with, if we do not simply take Guilmomette's quotation from a disputation of 1523, when Zwingli had already severed connections with the papacy, but see it in the context of his priestly life. Ordained a priest in 1506, Zwingli found from the beginning great problems with celibacy. Humanist that he was, it was his discovery of Erasmus' New Testament in 1516 that brought a change in his life. Erasmus in several of his works had laid great emphasis on the efficacy of Bible-reading as a remedy against sin, especially sexual sins. Philip Hughes narrates the result for Zwingli:

Zwingli read now, in the original words, St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians and, a priest of ten years standing, he was seized with the impulse to make a resolution "to have no relations with a woman, since Paul has said that it is a good thing to have no contact with them." And for the rest of the time that he spent at Glarus, and for his first year at Einsiedeln, he was able to keep his pledge. Then, [in] Zwingli's own words, "I succumbed and like the dog returned

29. The text of 1 Cor 7:7 reads as follows: "Given my preference [for being unmarried], I should like you to be as I am. Still, each one has his gift from God, one this and another that" (NAB). Luther evidently understands the text in the traditional sense of celibacy, not its eschatological sense. Guilmomette does not mention this verse, but it seems that it should be understood in terms of the coming Parousia, like the rest of the section from 1 Cor which he did treat above.

30. Luther, Selected Writings, 1:310-11.
to his vomit, as the apostle Peter says" ... 

When Zwingli wrote his account of it all at Einsiedeln in 1518, as an answer to charges made at Zürich when he sought the post at the Grossmünster, he had been in this wretched state of relapse for a year or so. And he had given up all hope of recovery. For in this letter he first defends himself (relatively) by saying he has rigorously left alone women who are married, and virgins. And with these he will never have aught to do. But more than this, knowing his weakness, he now refuses to promise. ... 31

A sad case, no doubt, but it seems clear that his theology derived from rationalizing his own personal difficulties.

In the case of Calvin, Guillemette quotes the Institutes, where Calvin writes against the imposition of priestly celibacy: "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. ..." 32

The point made by Calvin, however, is against obligatory celibacy, rather than whether celibacy is to be rejected in favor of marriage. This appears more clearly when after many pages of diatribes against religious life for men or women, he discusses the prohibition of marriage by Paul to those who had been received into the order of widows (1 Tim 5:12). After giving certain reasons why he considers this to be a somewhat different case, Calvin concludes with a disarming disavowal of any total hostility to celibacy:

Moreover, we disapprove of the vow of celibacy for no other reason than that it is wrongly considered as service of God and is rashly made by those to whom the power of continence has not been given. 33

That is to say, he rejects the vow for two reasons: first, as being considered a “good work”; second, if it is made obligatory, even

33. Calvin, Institutes, 2:1274-75. The quote is from p. 1275.
when the person has not been given the charism of celibacy by God. In other words Calvin is not to be taken as rejecting celibacy totally, but rather as regarding it as a special gift of God, a charism given to few.

In this and our previous discussion of Luther, we see that both the principal Reformers saw celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven as a precious gift from God, and both may justly be said to see celibacy, at least in theory, as superior to marriage. What they denounce is obligatory celibacy, and, as Lecler notes in the paragraph preceding that cited by Guillemette, “for them virginity and celibacy are a gratuitous gift of God, rare, exceptional, quasi-miraculous. . . .”

In view of the texts we have quoted in the preceding pages, and of two from Luther and Melanchthon cited below from Lecler, Lecler’s judgment of “exceptional, quasi-miraculous” seems to me much too strong. Since the Reformers’ main target was obligatory celibacy and vows as good works, they spent pages of diatribe before admitting that the doctrine of celibacy as a higher state was in fact founded in Scripture, though its bestowal by God was indeed rare, much more rare than what was thought at their time. The texts cited by Lecler which supplement our argument above are: “Virginity and chastity are better works and gifts than marriage” (Luther); and: “Virginity is a gift of greater value than marriage” (Melanchthon).

Moreover, Lecler admits in beginning his treatment of this canon that “[i]n the following canon, the Council affirms the preeminence of the state of virginity-celibacy. But it does so in well-determined limits, which the Protestant polemic explains.”

However, he later concludes concerning that canon, as he has been quoted by Guillemette:

The first proposition does not declare directly that the state of virginity-celibacy is superior to that of marriage, but reproves the


36. Ibid. 453-54.
Protestant theory which presents the state of marriage as preferable and as the only normal one for the fallen man subject to concupiscence.\textsuperscript{37}

Lecler goes on to argue (followed by Guillemette) that the second clause of the canon refers to those bound by vows of celibacy who find themselves unable to keep them. This should be conceded. Between the Council and the Reformers there is a different theology of the power of God’s sustaining grace at work. But without further evidence to the contrary, and with all due respect for the authority of Lecler, it seems to this historian that, even if indirectly, the Council does in fact affirm in the first clause the superiority of the celibate state over that of marriage.

**ADDED REFLECTIONS**

I entitle this section thus, because it seems to me that it is precisely in his section of this title that Guillemette has departed from his original purpose of examining the exegesis of the texts used by the magisterium and entered into other considerations on the question of celibacy itself, which are not based on solid proofs, but are rather “reflections.” He also introduces, and in some cases rightly refutes, certain rational arguments that are often used in favor of celibacy but which lack solid basis. But that is irrelevant to the avowed purpose of the article.

The principal difficulty, it seems to me, is the confusion which often occurs between the state of celibacy, and the way that it is lived out in practice. Surely no Christian who has any experience, celibate or married, will doubt that many married couples are finding God and living according to His will in a way that many technically celibate priests and religious are not. This is a fact, but it does not affect the theological distinction, unless we find, as Luther and Calvin professed to do, that practically all celibates are in reality living a hypocritical and unChristian life. A theory which is scarcely ever verified in practice can hardly claim any solid foundation. But of course no evidence has been offered here that such is the case.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 454.
Nor does Guillemette’s effort to effect a compromise by saying that both states are equal in value impress me as helpful. If God calls one to a charism and calls her/him to a state which demands a special effort to live in a way bringing one closer to Him, that charism and state can scarcely be no more than the equal of its opposite. A charism is a call to something higher; whether the beneficiary of the charism corresponds to God’s gift or not is another question.

It can be objected, however, that to maintain that celibacy is objectively superior to Christian marriage is to say that the great majority of Christians are called to an objectively less perfect state. Thus we would be judging married laity as second-class citizens of the Kingdom.

It seems there is a failure in this objection to make a distinction. It is not celibacy in itself which is a higher state, but celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. No doubt most Christians choose marriage, but not all do so for the sake of the Kingdom. Some indeed do consciously make their choice for the sake of the Kingdom, but it is because they understand that to be what God is calling them to. There does not seem to be any repugnance in the fact that God calls some to a higher state than He does others. Indeed that seems to be the import of Jesus’ choice of some and not others to be his apostles, as well as of his call of perfection to the rich young man who was looking for something more, but declined Jesus’ call (Mk 10:17-30). If one is called to a higher state, then its obligations will be more demanding, and the failure to meet those demands will make the person indeed to be a second-class citizen of the Kingdom, while those not called to the higher state of celibacy, can, if they will, fully pursue the Kingdom in their own state, and be “first-class citizens” of the Kingdom.

A final objection may be made that the entire argument is otiose, since the allegedly higher state is so only in the abstract, and what counts before God is how one lives in the state to which he or she has been called. Hence the assertion of a higher state of celibacy for the Kingdom is likely merely to lead to a kind of clericalism. The objection has force, as the history of the

Church amply demonstrates, even today. But to abandon a theological position simply because it can be and has been abused does not seem to be correct, and risks forgetting important evangelical values. If the call to celibacy for the Kingdom were not a call to a higher state, it is hard to see any theologically sound reason for choosing it, inasmuch as it is admittedly not natural to the human person; nor for considering it a special charism, as the whole Christian tradition has seen it. 39

CONCLUSIONS

1) Though I have abstained from in-depth discussion of the New Testament texts which the article professes to study, it is relevant to note that such major contemporary authorities as the authors of JBC and NJBC sustain the traditional understanding of Mt 19:10-12, as did Luther and Calvin, and give no reference to any dispute on the meaning.

2) Guillemette’s statement about the “bias” of all Fathers and theologians who have written on the question of the superiority of the celibate state to that of marriage, is quite illogical when he finds no possibility of such “bias” on the part of married theologians.

3) Guillemette is factually without basis in his generalization about the celibate state of all the Fathers, and in his assertion that this was what influenced their theological positions, and

39. Though it appeared some months after the article of Guillemette, the clear assertion of John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation, Vita Consecrata, deserves to be quoted here. It is true that he is speaking of the consecrated life as a whole, but he hinges this on celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. Nor does he base himself on the texts discussed by Guillemette, but on the tradition of the Church. The passage deserves quoting at length, together with its relating of the celibate to the married state.

The church has always taught the pre-eminence of perfect chastity for the sake of the kingdom, and rightly considers it the “door” of the whole consecrated life. She also shows great esteem for the vocation to marriage, which makes spouses “witnesses to and cooperators in the fruitfulness of holy mother church, who signify and share in the love with which Christ has loved his bride and because of which he delivered himself up on her behalf.” (Origins 25/41 [April 4, 1996] 692, no. 32.)
takes no account of the contrary evidence. Moreover, he ignores the fact that the most prominent treatise on virginity in the fourth century, by Gregory of Nyssa, was by a married man.

4) His picture of the opinions of the Protestant Reformers on the subject is inadequate and in many respects mistaken. This affects his interpretation of the Council of Trent.

Some of these points may seem minor to the reader, but in the discussion of obligatory celibacy for diocesan priests — a discussion which should take place — it is important that the state of celibacy for the Kingdom of God, as proposed by Our Lord, should not be disparaged by the failure to make proper distinctions. As the experience of other non-Roman churches which theoretically value celibacy but in which it has almost disappeared for the secular clergy, has shown, the existence of a married clergy has by no means resolved all clerical problems. If it were to be looked on from a purely pragmatic point of view — that is, the supposed increase in vocations it is alleged to bring — and neglecting the sociological, economic, and formational problems this would entail, not only would the formidable changes needed in church structure be neglected, but an evangelical value enshrined in the tradition of the Church could be endangered.