

# Francis Speaks, Scalfari Transcribes, Brandmüller Shreds

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As a Church historian, the German cardinal refutes the notion according to which clerical celibacy was an invention of the 10th century. No, he objects: its origin is with Jesus and the apostles. And he explains why

by Sandro Magister



ROME, July 19, 2014 – “Perhaps you do not know that celibacy was established in the 10th century, 900 years after the death of our Lord. The Eastern Catholic Church even now has the option for its priests to marry. The problem certainly exists, but it is not large in scope. It will take time, but the solutions are there and I will find them.”

This is the answer on the issue of the celibacy of the clergy that Pope Francis gave to Eugenio Scalfari in the interview granted to the founder of the newspaper “la Repubblica” and guiding light of secular Italian intellectuals, published on Sunday, July 13.

On the same day, a note from Fr. Federico Lombardi, director of the press office of the Holy See, clarified:

“If it can be maintained that overall the article conveys the sense and spirit of the conversation between the Holy Father and Scalfari, what was said on the occasion of a previous 'interview' that appeared in 'Repubblica' must be reiterated forcefully, namely that the individual statements reported, in the formulation presented, cannot be attributed to the pope with certainty.”

In particular, Fr. Lombardi cast doubt on the notion that the pope had proclaimed, with regard to the celibacy of the clergy, "I will find the solutions."

But he made no objection to the other highly reckless words put into the pope's mouth, according to which "celibacy was established in the 10th century, 900 years after the death of our Lord."

A Church historian no less authoritative than German cardinal Walter Brandmüller, for more than twenty years the president of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, in fact felt himself duty-bound to demonstrate the lack of foundation for this idea.

He did so with an analysis published in the newspaper "Il Foglio" on July 16, reproduced in its entirety further below.

Scalfari's previous interview with Francis, which appeared in "La Repubblica" of October 1, 2013, also raised doubts about its reliability. So much so that the following November 15 it was taken down from the official website of the Vatican, where it had been placed among the pope's discourses and afterward inexplicably reappeared, translated into five languages, only to disappear once again a few days ago.

Scalfari himself admitted that he had accompanied the preliminary draft of that first conversation that he sent to the pope - which did not raise any objections and was published without revision - with a note in which he wrote:

"Keep in mind that some of the things you said to me are not written down here. And that some of the things I attribute to you, you did not say. But I have put them there so that the reader may understand who you are."

Months later, a second conversation between Scalfari and Francis did not undergo any journalistic "translation," at the prudential request of the Vatican.

But after the third conversation, which took place last July 10, this time as well without a recording, the pope again gave Scalfari the go-ahead to include his changes, with the results that can be seen.

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# WE PRIESTS, CELIBATE LIKE CHRIST

by Walter Brandmüller

Dear Mr. Scalfari,

Although I have not enjoyed the privilege of meeting you in person, I would like to revisit your statements concerning celibacy contained in the account of your conversation with Pope Francis, published on July 13, 2014 and immediately disputed in their authenticity by the director of the Vatican press office. As an "old professor" who for thirty years taught Church history at the university, I would like to bring to your attention the current state of the research in this field.

In particular, it must be emphasized in the first place that celibacy by no means dates back to a law invented 900 years after the death of Christ. It is instead the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke that report the words of Jesus in this regard.

Matthew writes (19:29): "And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life."

What Mark writes (10:29) is very similar: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold."

Luke (18:29ff.) is even more precise: "Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."

Jesus does not address these words to the masses, but rather to those whom he sends out to spread his Gospel and proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God.

In order to fulfill this mission it is necessary to free oneself from any earthly and human attachment. And seeing that this separation signifies the loss of what is taken for granted, Jesus promises a "recompense" that is more than appropriate.

At this point it is often highlighted that "leaving everything" referred only to the duration of the voyage of proclaiming his Gospel, and that once they had finished their task the disciples would return to their families. But there is no trace of this. The text of the Gospels, in referring to eternal life, are speaking of something definitive.

Now, seeing that the Gospels were written between 40 and 70 A.D., their redactors would have

been brought into a bad light if they had attributed to Jesus words that did not correspond to their conduct of life. Jesus, in fact, demands that those who have been made participants in his mission must also adopt his way of life.

But what does Paul mean, when in the first letter to the Corinthians (9:1, 4-6) he writes: "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? . . . Do we not have the right to our food and drink? Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brethren of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?" Do not these questions and statements take it for granted that the apostles were accompanied by their wives?

One must proceed with caution here. The apostle's rhetorical questions referred to the right of the one who proclaims the Gospel to live at the expense of the community, and this also applies to the one who accompanies him.

And this obviously brings up the question of who this companion may be. The Greek expression "adelphén gynaika" requires an explanation. "Adelphe" means sister. And here sister in the faith means a Christian, while "gyne" indicates - more generically - a woman, whether virgin or wife. In short, a female person. This makes it impossible to demonstrate that the apostles were accompanied by wives. Because if this were a case one would be unable to understand why an "adelphe" is distinctly spoken of as a sister, and therefore a Christian. As for the wife, it must be understood that the apostle left her at the time when he became part of the circle of disciples.

Chapter 8 of the Gospel of Luke helps to clarify this. It states: "The twelve were with [Jesus], and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means." From this description it seems logical to deduce that the apostles followed the example of Jesus.

Attention must also be called to the stirring appeal for celibacy or conjugal abstinence made by the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 7:29ff.): "I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none." And again: "The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided." It is clear that Paul is addressing these words in the first place to bishops and priests. And he himself would have adhered to this ideal.

In order to prove that Paul or the Church of apostolic times did not acknowledge celibacy, the letters to Timothy and Titus, the "pastoral letters," are sometimes brought out as evidence. And in effect, in the first letter to Timothy (3:2) a married bishop is mentioned. And the original Greek text is repeatedly translated in the following way: "Let the bishop be the husband of a woman," which is taken to be a precept. But one needs only a rudimentary knowledge of Greek to translate this correctly: "For this the bishop must be above reproach, married only once (and he must be the husband of a woman!), sober and judicious." And also in the letter to Titus we read: "An elder (meaning a priest or bishop) must be blameless and married only once."

These are indications that tend to rule out the possibility that a priest or bishop should be ordained who has remarried after the death of his wife (successive bigamy). Because apart from the fact that at that time a remarried widower was not looked upon kindly, for the Church there was also the consideration that in this way a man could never give any guarantee to respect abstinence, to which a bishop or priest would have to devote himself.

## THE PRACTICE OF THE POST-APOSTOLIC CHURCH

The original form of celibacy therefore allowed the priest or bishop to continue his family life, but not his conjugal life. For this reason as well the preference was to ordain men who had reached an advanced age.

The fact that all of this can be traced back to ancient and sacred apostolic traditions is testified to by the works of ecclesiastical writers like Clement of Alexandria and the north African Tertullian, who lived in the 2nd-3rd century after Christ. Another witness of the high consideration bestowed on abstinence among Christians is a series of edifying tales of the apostles, the apocryphal 'Acts of the Apostles' composed in the 2nd century and widely read.

In the 3rd century the literary documentation on the abstinence of the clergy multiplied and became increasingly explicit, especially in the East. For example, here is a passage from the Syrian 'Didascalia': "The bishop, before he is ordained, must be put to the test to establish if he is chaste and has raised his children in the fear of God." The great theologian Origen of Alexandria (3rd century) also recognized the celibacy of abstinence as binding; a celibacy that he explains and explores theologically in various works. And obviously there are other documents that could be brought forward in support, something that obviously is not possible here.

## THE FIRST LAW ON CELIBACY

It was the Council of Elvira in 305-306 that put this practice of apostolic origin into the form of a law. With canon 33, the Council prohibited bishops, priests, deacons, and all other clergy from having conjugal relations with their wives, and likewise prohibited them from having children. At the time it was therefore thought that conjugal abstinence was compatible with family life. Thus even the sainted pope Leo I, called Leo the Great, wrote around 450 that ordained men did not have to repudiate their wives. They were to remain together with them, but as if "they did not have them," as Paul writes in the first letter to the Corinthians (7:29).

With the passing of time there was an increasing tendency to ordain only celibate men. The codification would come in the Middle Ages, an era in which it was taken for granted that the priest and bishop would be celibate. It was another matter that the canonical discipline was not always followed to the letter, but this should not come as a surprise. And, as is in the nature of things, the observance of celibacy has seen highs and lows over the course of the centuries.

There is, for example, the famous and fiery dispute in the 11th century, at the time of what is called the Gregorian reform. At that juncture one witnessed a split that was so stark - especially in the German and French churches - as to lead the German prelates who were contrary to celibacy to forcibly expel from his diocese the bishop Altmann of Passau. In France, the pope's emissaries who were charged with insisting on the discipline of celibacy were threatened with death, and at a synod held in Paris the sainted abbot Walter of Pontoise was beaten by bishops opposed to celibacy and was thrown in prison. In spite of this the reform succeeded and a renewed religious springtime took place.

It is interesting to note that the contestation of the precept of celibacy has always coincided with signs of decadence in the Church, while in times of renewed faith and cultural blossoming one has noted a strengthened observance of celibacy.

And it is certainly not difficult to draw historical parallels with the current crisis from these observations.

#### THE PROBLEMS OF THE CHURCH OF THE EAST

Two questions that are frequently posed still remain open. There is the one concerning the practice of celibacy on the part of the Catholic Church of the Byzantine empire and of the Eastern rite, which does not admit marriage for bishops and monks but grants it for priests on the condition that they be married before they receive the sacrament. And taking precisely this practice as their example, there are some who ask if it could not be adopted by the Latin West as well.

In this regard must be emphasized in the first place that it was precisely in the East that the practice of abstinent celibacy was held to be binding. And it was only during the Council of 691, called "Quinisextum" or "Trullanum," when the religious and cultural decadence of the Byzantine empire was evident, that the rupture with the apostolic patrimony was reached. This Council, influenced to a great extent by the emperor, who wanted new legislation to restore order in relations, was never recognized by the popes. It was precisely then that the Church of the East adopted its practice. When later, beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries, and afterward, various Orthodox Churches returned to the Church of the West, the problem was posed in Rome about how to deal with the married clergy of those Churches. The various popes decided, for the good and unity of the Church, not to require any modification in their way of life for priests who had returned to the mother Church.

#### THE EXCEPTION IN OUR TIME

There is a similar motivation behind the papal dispensation from celibacy granted - beginning with Pius XII - to the Protestant pastors who convert to the Catholic Church and want to be ordained

priests. This rule was recently applied by Benedict XVI to the numerous Anglican prelates who wanted to unite, in conformity with the apostolic constitution "Anglicanorum Coetibus," with the Catholic mother Church. With this extraordinary concession, the Church recognizes the long and sometimes painful religious journey of these men of faith who have reached their destination with conversion. A destination that in the name of truth leads those directly concerned to renounce even the financial support realized until that moment. It is the unity of the Church, a good of immense value, that justifies these exceptions.

#### BINDING PATRIMONY?

But apart from these exceptions, the other fundamental question is raised, and that is: can the Church be authorized to renounce an evident apostolic patrimony?

This is an option that is continually taken into consideration. Some think that this decision could not be taken only by a part of the Church, but by a general Council. In this way it is thought that in spite of not involving all the ecclesiastical ranks, at least for some the obligation of celibacy could be relaxed if not abolished outright. And what appears inopportune today could be the reality tomorrow. But if there were the desire to do this one would have to bring back to the forefront the binding element of the apostolic traditions. And one could also ask if, with a decision made in the assembly of a Council, it would be possible to abolish the celebration of Sunday, which, if one wished to be meticulous, has fewer biblical foundations than celibacy.

To conclude, allow me to advance a consideration projected into the future: if it is still valid to contend that every ecclesiastical reform worthy of this definition must emerge from a profound understanding of the ecclesiastical faith, then the current dispute over celibacy would be overcome through a deepened understanding of what it means to be a priest. And if it were understood and taught that the priesthood is not a function of service exercised in the name of the community, but that the priest - by virtue of the sacrament received - teaches, guides, and sanctifies "in persona Christi," all the more so would it be understood that it is precisely for this reason that he also takes on Christ's way of life. And a priesthood understood and lived in this way would once again exercise a power of attraction over the finest of the young.

As for the rest, it must be taken into account that celibacy, just like virginity in the name of the Kingdom of Heaven, will always be troublesome for those who have a secularized conception of life. But as Jesus said in this regard: "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it."

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The newspaper in which Cardinal Brandmüller published his analysis, on July 13, 2014:

[> Il Foglio](#)