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Is Pope Francis open to optional celibacy?

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Pope Francis

In a 2012 interview [1] about celibacy, then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio noted that in the Eastern churches, priests can be married, and "they are very good priests." He said: "It is a matter of discipline, not of faith. It can change."

He stated his support for celibacy in the interview: "I am in favor of maintaining celibacy, with all its pros and cons, because we have ten centuries of good experiences rather than failures," he said. "Tradition has weight and validity."

But what is remarkable is the way he qualifies his statements: "For the moment, I am in favor of maintaining celibacy." Likewise, when he noted that some organizations are pushing for more discussion about the issue, he said, "For now, the discipline of celibacy stands firm."

"For the moment" and "for now" are not the kind of qualifications one normally hears when bishops and cardinals discuss celibacy.

He even went on to propose a hypothetical: "If, hypothetically, Western Catholicism were to review the issue of celibacy, I think it would do so for cultural reasons (as in the East), not so much as a universal option."

What is totally unacceptable to Pope Francis is a priest who does not observe his promise of celibacy. If a priest falls, he said, "I help him to get on track again." By that, he means doing penance and practicing celibacy.

"The double life is no good for us," he said. "I don't like it because it means building on falsehood."

In addition, if a priest gets a woman pregnant, "he has to leave the ministry and should take care of that child, even if he chooses not to marry that woman. For just as that child has the right to have a mother, he has a right to the face of a father."

Pope Francis takes celibacy very seriously. If it is the rule, it must be observed. But could the rule change?

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