

“Jesus’ Wife”  
 Week of October 8, 2012  
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY  
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

A fragment of a fourth-century papyrus, written in Coptic, makes some reference to Jesus’ wife. It got front-page attention in *The New York Times*. The story seemed to have the imprimatur of a professor at Harvard Divinity School in an academic paper which she delivered recently in Rome.

Predictably, other newspapers and television and radio outlets were on their phones looking for comments from theologians and various religious spokesmen and spokeswomen.

Catholics and a large number of non-Catholics assume that there is a Catholic answer, and that it begins with some variation on the leading expression, “of course not”. They would be surprised if a Catholic began to answer in any other way. Sort of like a “man bites dog” response.

But only a conservative Catholic would expect there to be a Catholic answer to the question, and would quickly excoriate anyone, especially a Catholic theologian, who might say otherwise.

In a subsequent op-ed piece in *The Times*, Father James Martin, a Jesuit editor at *America* magazine, while noting that there wasn’t much evidence in the New Testament or church history for the hypothesis that Jesus had been married, said that he wouldn’t be troubled one way or the other. Whether Jesus was married would make no difference to his faith in Jesus or his vow of chastity.

The controversy had reached a boiling point in various forms over the centuries; and most recently with the discussion surrounding Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and the subsequent film version (2006).

I would agree almost totally with Father Martin who wrote in *The New York Times* whether Jesus had a wife or not would make no difference to his faith in Jesus or to his vow of chastity. But, unfortunately, many Catholics might assume that the vow of chastity and the promise of celibacy are one and the same. They are not.

Every human being is bound to practice the virtue of chastity, even if they might differ on its content and scope, whether vowed or not. On the other hand, the promise of celibacy is not in response to a divine command.

There are Catholic priests who are married (for example, ex-Anglicans and ex-Episcopalians who have become Roman Catholics and priests of the various Eastern rites), while thousands of Catholic priests of the Roman or Latin rite are indeed still bound by the man-made promise of celibacy.

If Jesus had a wife, however, the primary basis for obligatory clerical celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church would be out the window.

So the question is an important one after all. It affects thousands of priests in the Roman Catholic Church, including most of its pastors and associates, as well as priests who teach in our colleges, universities, and high schools, the many who are chaplains in the military, in hospitals, and in prisons, the dwindling few who serve as editors of their diocesan newspapers and other publications, and priests in various special ministries.

The Vatican, however, has subsequently said in a sharply worded editorial published in the official Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, that ample evidence existed to dismiss the papyrus as an “inept forgery” and “a fake.”

Dr. Karen King, the Harvard scholar, did not imply in her paper that Jesus had been married, but she did suggest that the question of his celibacy and marital status was a matter of debate among early Christians.

According to *The Times*, Dr. King has arranged to have the chemical composition of the ink

tested at Harvard in mid-October. She said in an interview that the center at Harvard could not schedule the testing before she had presented her paper.

Where does that leave us? Pretty much where we were at the beginning of the most recent controversy. However, the issue remains important, even to the Vatican. The future of clerical celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church remains in the balance.

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"The LCWR"  
Week of October 29, 2012  
ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY  
By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

It's old news by now, but I want to add my name to the already long list of people who have supported the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) over against the Vatican and their allies in North America.

The nuns have been in the forefront of the struggle to keep the spirit and the letter of the Second Vatican Council alive, not only in religious communities of women but also in the Catholic Church at large.

Unfortunately, the LCWR is a scapegoat for everything that the right-wing in the Catholic Church loathes. One should recognize that ultra-conservatives exist in the highest ranks of the Vatican, excluding no ecclesiastical office in the Church.

As I said (to a standing ovation) at the symposium held in my honor at the University of Notre Dame toward the end of April, few North American Catholics would be Catholics today if it were not for the nuns. The nuns, I insisted (to another standing ovation), are the greatest asset to the Church in North America, and one hopes and prays that the Vatican will soon come to realize that as well.

The nuns are not only among the leaders in the Church who wish to keep alive the spirit and the letter of the Second Vatican Council, but are also among the thousands who are celebrating with the rest of the Church the fiftieth anniversary of the Council's opening in the fall of 1962.

The Council brought fresh air into the Church, just as Pope John XXIII had hoped, but neither he nor his closest friends could have foreseen the terrible backlash he would also unleash.

He couldn't have foreseen, for example, the concerted efforts of his successors, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, to undermine the Council, consciously or not, by the appointment of bishops and archbishops unfriendly to the Council.

Examples of such bishops are (with the diocese and year they were first ordained a bishop): Thomas Welsh, Arlington, 1970 (now deceased); Thomas Daily, Brooklyn, 1974 (now retired); Nicholas DiMarzio, Brooklyn, 1996; David Ricken, Green Bay, 2000; Richard Lennon, Cleveland, 2001.

Examples of such archbishops are: John Myers, Newark, 1987; Joseph Kurtz, Louisville, 1999; Jose Gomez, Los Angeles, 2001; Francis George, Chicago, 1990; Charles Chaput, Philadelphia, 1988; Edward Egan, New York, 1985 (now retired).

Nor could John XXIII have foreseen the wholesale assault on the nuns of the United States, not only in the "visitation" of the sisters' communities, but also in the investigation of the LCWR, which has been the source of so much good for the U.S. Church.

Neither could he have foreseen the demoralization that has set into the Catholic Church nowadays, with many Catholics looking forlornly at the Second Vatican Council as if it never happened and the pontificate of John XXIII as if he never existed.

The bishops appointed by John Paul II and Benedict XVI insist that they support the council, but that it was misinterpreted by progressive Catholics. Progressive Catholics, on the other hand, feel that the recent crop of bishops overemphasize the abortion issue to the practical exclusion of the Church's traditional emphasis on social justice and the needs of the poor, which the Nuns on the Bus have highlighted.

We cannot overemphasize the fact that a pall of sadness now covers the Church. Many have dropped out (the recent Pew poll disclosed that ex-Catholics constitute one-tenth of the U.S. religious landscape), others stay because they have found a worshipping community that meets their spiritual

needs (usually on a college or university campus, where the long arms of a bishop cannot reach).

But I have not given up hope, nor should you, my readers. The nuns (including the LCWR) will eventually be vindicated, a new pope will be elected whom the electors think is only a seat-warmer (just as they once regarded John XXIII), and the pendulum will swing the other way. It always has.

Some of us will never see the change, like the saintly Moses, but it will come. As John XXIII insisted, history is the great teacher of life. And history has much to teach us.

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