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No, Jesus wasn't married, and it's silly to think otherwise

Pat Perriello | Sep. 26, 2012 NCR Today

I am unable to resist wading into the discussion of whether Jesus had a wife. The recent finding of a 4th-century Coptic manuscript in which Jesus is mentioned as referring to "my wife" has unleashed a torrent of commentary and speculation. I wanted to respond to Susan Reimer's article in *The Baltimore Sun*, "At Home with the Jesuses." [1]

Let me briefly make three points about her article. First, though it is difficult to say anything with certainty when it comes to the historicity of the Gospels, we can say with considerable confidence that Jesus did not make that statement. Scholars tell us there are very few direct quotes in the Gospels, as they were composed decades after the events they recount. We are pretty sure no one was walking around with a notebook taking notes as Jesus walked the shores of Galilee. In this case, we are talking about a document that was created no earlier than around 150, which would put its composition about 70 years or more after the composition of the Gospels.

Most would agree, then, that assuming the document is authentic, it represents a glimpse into the issues the church was grappling with during the second century. It is likely those who saw celibacy as a way of drawing closer to Jesus stressed his life of celibacy. Others, like the author of this document, produced a narrative that portrayed Jesus as a married man who promoted the value of married life.

Although it has been noted that a typical first-century rabbi would almost certainly have been married, it is also true that Jesus was familiar with the ascetic Essene sect that we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls and that did value the charism of celibacy. There is simply no evidence other than idle speculation to suggest Jesus was married. There is, of course, a strong inclination to sensationalize these kinds of stories, but nothing is to be gained by doing so.

Second, nothing changes the fact that the best argument for a married clergy resides in the fact that Peter, the first pope, was definitely married. Add to that the historical record that involved married clergy for centuries, plus the continuing married clergy among Eastern rite churches united with Rome, and it is difficult to say priests cannot marry. When you add to that reality the presence of married clergy within the Roman Catholic Church today in the form of converted Episcopal clergy, you have quite a powerful argument for married clergy. It really becomes unnecessary to try to show that Jesus himself was married. Church history demonstrates that celibacy was valued and also that a married clergy existed. Thus, I continue to believe the solution should include a married diocesan clergy as well as various religious orders that would maintain the tradition of celibacy as a positive life choice.

Finally, as Susan Reimer seeks to show, our response to offensive religious material is very different from what we have seen recently in the Middle East. Reimer takes the opportunity of this fourth-century document to produce an irreverent analysis of what a marriage of Jesus might look like in contemporary society. Her tongue-in-cheek references to Jesus and Mary (not clear who this Mary is) finding each other on "The Bachelor" and the kind of typical marital differences that would likely mar their daily life would almost certainly be considered offensive to many Christians. Yet I'm not aware of any protests in the street. Reimer's somewhat over-the-top scenario is meant to demonstrate that offensive comments about Jesus or Mohammed are not cause for the

violent protests we are seeing in the Middle East, and we would all do well to tone down our rhetoric and to eschew inappropriate violent responses to such comments.

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