

Defending Clerical Marriage—Katharina Schütz Zell (1524)

Abstract

In this text, Katharina Schütz Zell (1497/98–1562) of Strasbourg, the daughter of a master artisan and magistrate, defends the Protestant side of the debate on celibate life versus clerical marriage. In 1523, she had married Matthias Zell (1477–1548), a native of Kaysersberg in Alsace. A university graduate, he became pastor of St. Lawrence's, Strasbourg's cathedral parish. Zell was among the first group of Strasbourg pastors to marry. The couple faced harsh criticism, however, and Katharina soon found herself compelled to defend her marriage, her husband, and herself. She authored several printed pamphlets in which she argued (as Catholic reformists had for decades) that priests should be allowed to marry, and that (an evangelical novelty) celibacy was not only un-Biblical, it also encouraged sexual laxity among the clergy and made priests unfit to be confessors and confidants to married laypersons. Katharina's own marriage attests to the strong ties that developed between the evangelical clergy and the upper strata of artisans, whose political power was greater in Strasbourg than in most other cities.

Source

Strasbourg, [before September 10, 1524]

[...] They [the Catholic clergy] also reject the marriage of priests, although it is taught in Holy Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, not in obscure but in clear, plain language, so that even children and fools could read and understand it, as I have shown. I proved this in a longer writing to the Bishop of Strasbourg, in which I contrast marriage and whoredom with one another on the basis of Holy Scripture. I would to God that the bishop would get so angry with me that everyone would read my explanation.

Why, speaking of marriage, do they stand so firmly against it, as though they intended to spite God and suppress it by force? There are, I must relate, two reasons. The first is that the popes, bishops, and their lackeys, the vicars and their fellows, would not get so much whoring tax from married couples as from whores and rascals. If a priest has a wife, he behaves like any other honest, pious burgher, and he pays the bishop no tax for it, since God has allowed him to be free. If they have whores, however, they become bondsmen to the popes and bishops. Whoever wants one, must ask and get the bishop's permission and pay a tax for it. So the latter have devised an annual payment [...] which, poor or rich, the priest must pay, just like one who leases land from another and pays an annual rent for it, that's what they do. They have also set their own manager or steward over these leases, and he collects the annual dues. He is called a Fiscal, and he receives an annual salary.

So they protect and defend such outrages and vices against the whole of Holy Scripture, in which the Holy Ghost so strictly banishes the whoremongers, excludes them from the Kingdom of God, and forbids anyone to eat or drink with them—as St. Paul says in First Corinthians 1:5–6 and in Ephesians 5. God, however, established marriage for all men in the initial act of creation, and no one has been exempted from it except for the three men in Matt. 19, and it is also expressly recommended for priests, as St. Paul says to Timothy and Titus in his letters to them. What God thus desires, they wish to condemn, punish, and forbid for all of those who come under their power. But the lewd chastity, the diluvian, sodomitic whoredom of Noah's time, they do not punish, and have never punished it but rather protected it. Yes, clergymen and laymen have formed an alliance to struggle violently against God. Oh, the blindness of the rulers, how do you look to one another, [you] who should be dedicated to everything honorable? You must allow it to be said of you, that one has five or six whores, the other seven women birthing, plus a pretty doxy in the house and lots more. It is just as Isaiah says, there is no health in them from head to

toe. Oh God, if You look down, I know that it will but heighten Your anger.

The second reason [why the clergy are so set against marriage] is that if the priests have wives, they cannot exchange them among themselves, as they do with the whores. One goes out, another comes in. For St. Paul says, a bishop is a man who has one wife, for which reason he would have to live honorably, and if a wife did not suit, he could not exchange her for another. There is much trouble in marriage, for one must share and suffer with another, and of this they wish to be free. Yet very often whores, too, make trouble one does not have from a pious wife.

If the priests could honorably marry, they could preach from the pulpit more effectively against adultery. Otherwise, how can they condemn that in which they themselves are stuck. Watch over me, and I will watch over you. If, however, a priest had a wife, and if he did something bad, people would know how to punish him. But they always have a word of defense, saying, "It's all very well for laymen to speak, for you have your wives. I am also a man, and how can I raise myself up to Heaven?" Truly, why are such things not left as God made them to be, each having his wife to prevent licentiousness? Does God not know better than the Devil what is good?

For the prohibition against marriage comes from the Devil alone, but marriage comes from God, as the Holy Ghost says in the letter to Timothy. But if it were so, the laity would not tolerate such whoreson priests in their midst. When they die, the children grab on to the estate. Otherwise the friends get it and kick the bastards out, for what do they care if the Devil takes the soul away. Some of the whores and children can nevertheless foresee, as we see every day, that they are now going the way of some of the nobility. Good thing, too.

Married priests, on the other hand, would be obliged to punish adultery with great severity, and as St. John says, it does not become you to have seven women in labor at once, that is, to live in whoredom, and nonetheless to help rule the land and the people. Such folk should be strung up on the gallows. [...] Throwing stones at him would serve him right. Thus, once a young fellow said, when he was being punished for his whoredom. "If I should not do it, why does my father do it? If he will forbid it to me, he must first be free of it himself."

Such are the faults of those who oppose the marriage of priests. Part of them consists of those who possess benefices and other things. Another part consists of their friends, fathers, mothers, siblings, aunts, and cousins. They, too, fear that if the priests can have wives and [legitimate] children, it will deprive them of their inheritance and other things. A third part are those who are actually involved in whoredom, for they fear that eventually they, too, will be at risk. Thus, in the end Sodom and Gomorrah will be swallowed up in sulfur and brimstone that rains down from Heaven. Oh God, put an end to it! How long must the soul of the just Lot be tortured? And save the just Lot, as You have promised through Your angel, for You have thus set an example of how the godless shall fare in the future. For while the just man lives justly among such folk, he must daily suffer their tortures. But You know how to deliver the just from temptation and to preserve the unrighteous for their punishment on the Last Day.

There is a lot more, but I won't relate it here, for persons more learned than I have written enough about it. Among the matters is the service of the saints, of which I would write a bit. As St. Paul says to us in Hebrews 11–13, the saints should remember, etc.

Should anyone say to me now that this is an ineptly long speech, which has brought you far from your starting point, my answer is to acknowledge this. It is true, but perhaps it has happened of necessity. If you mean that this matter is none of my business [I reply that] I have seen how many souls have been taken, and are still being taken, by the Devil. This is also a reason why I have helped the priests to establish [clerical] marriage. And the very first one here at Strasbourg occurred with God's help, for I had made up my mind not to marry. But then I witnessed the great fear, the raging opposition, and the great

lewdness. When I nevertheless took a husband, I meant to give heart to and show the way to all Christians, as I hope to have done. Therefore, I also wrote a little book, in which are displayed the grounds of my faith and the reason for my marriage. Which surprised not a few people, for no one had a clue in word or deed that I intended to marry, for which reason I had the idea that I needed to offer my reasons, so far as I have learned and knowing nothing to the contrary, also moved by my husband, namely, that he entered this marriage for the honor of God and the salvation of himself and all men. I find no trace of dishonorable desire or other such feelings in him. And I have been granted neither great wealth nor other gifts that might have motivated him.

His action, plus his teaching and his way of life, have brought him such envy from the godless, that his health and life are not worth more than those of the birds in the air and the worms in the earth, much less those of men. And, to return to my original aim of justifying my husband, I must say that such envy is so deeply rooted in the hearts of the godless, that if they could injure him in body, soul, or life, they have done so, and they have invented such devilish great lies about him and spread them through every land.

First, they say that I have abandoned him. That requires no answer. The liars themselves are shamed, for I have never spent a day outside of Strasbourg.

Second, they say that he hanged himself in sorrow for marrying me. This merits the mere reply that perhaps he has been transformed into a younger man of contrary mind. Yes, they would give half their wealth, were it true.

Third, since he didn't want to hang himself, they invented other lies. For example, that he seduced a local woman in a garden. Since this one wasn't believed, and their lie was discovered, they tried another one and invented other devilish and shameful lies, which they spread through the whole city of Strasbourg and in the countryside as well. One of them says that he beat me so terribly and such, that he often threw me out of his house. Another shameful lie tells that I found him with a maidservant, which I could not bear, and he beat me and kicked me out of the house. And that I went blubbering to the ammeister,^[1] that for eight days I lived apart from him in my father's house, and other such fairy tales. They lie so badly that they tell one tale in one place and another in another.

What shall I reply, except that they are the Devil's children? He is also a liar who produces such lies in them. For these stories have no basis, being concocted solely out of the Devil's inspiration. For my husband, as God is my witness that I do not lie, has been with me and I with him, and we have never disagreed, not for a quarter of an hour. Nor has he ever injured me in any way, large or small, with word or deed. Nor I him, I trust. And all I know at this moment is that we think of ourselves as one, and whatever conforms to God's will, that thing we shall do. As for the maidservant, I have no maid but only a little girl, still young and innocent, who knows nothing of such things, and to whom my husband has said no more than four words while he was at home. Nor have I ever detected such lust or wantonness in him. And even if the girl were old enough to give me such concern, the Antichrist keeps my husband so busy that, even if he were so inclined, he has not time for it.

To bring this briefly to conclusion, [I will say that] I was not responsible for how my husband kept house before we were married, but [in fact] he did so as commanded by the popes and bishops who have forbidden marriage [to priests], which God permits, and allow the keeping of concubines, which God forbids. For this reason^[2] I took him [in marriage], seeing how he and others lived, intending to help win his and many other souls through God's grace and power, as, I hope, I have done. But since I am a woman, I will stand for him with my honor, body, and life, since such liars attack him undeservedly and without true cause and tell lies about him. For the stories that have been told about him are all concocted and invented, without any basis in fact. Toward me and toward the whole world, he behaves in such a way that no one can denounce him to the world, except by lies. For the heart's power to seek God cannot be harmful to man, etc. God desires, therefore, that our marriage stand as it is now until the

very end, and I hope that it is and will remain pleasing to God, useful to both of our souls, and beneficial to many others in soul and body. I can't help it if this marriage does not help the Antichrist and his crew. And even if he rises and comes to the aid of the princes of this world, so that we must suffer exile and death, it is a consolation to us that Christ says, "You foolish and downcast hearts, before you will believe everything the prophets have spoken, will Christ have to suffer and be glorified?" As we suffer, so Christ suffers in us, for we are his members. What did the prophets say? Read David, the great prophet, who in the Psalms says, the heathens have gnashed their teeth, and the peoples have fomented useless things. The kings of the earth stood by one another, and the princes gathered together against God and His anointed. Have they not gathered once again against God and His Word, in which Christ is proclaimed? Isaiah 47 says the same, how the just will be ruined here, and no one will take heed of them, but they shall one day have peace, etc. And all the prophets say how the just will be cast down, and the godless will rule, until God's judgment is passed over them. Thus, we Christians should await the end patiently. For this reason I have happily placed myself and my spouse in God's hand, and may His will be done in us. I know of no greater honor we can experience than to die cast down by this world, and that he should speak to me, and I to him, on the cross, and strengthen each another. Therefore, he and I will bear such lies and every insult, yes, even death, in patience, peace, and joy, which are the fruits of the Spirit. And we shall say with the prophet Isaiah, chapter 41, Do good or evil, as you can, we will speak with and see one another and have no fear of any man.

NOTES

[1] The ammeister was the highest magistrate of Strasbourg; he was like a mayor. The office was reserved to members of the guilds, of whom six held office as ammeisters at one time, serving as ruling ammeister (*de facto* head of the government) in annual rotation—trans.

[2] That is, because he lived chastely—trans.

Source of original German text: Ruth Kastner, ed., *Quellen zur Reformation 1517–1555*. Darmstadt: WBG, 1994, pp. 366–72.

Translation: Thomas A. Brady Jr.

Recommended Citation: Defending Clerical Marriage—Katharina Schütz Zell (1524), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-4332>> [April 04, 2025].