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Depicted here in prison, St. Peter offered an early model of Christian celibacy by leaving his family to follow Jesus. This painting of the first pope is displayed at Ss. Peter and Paul Church in Rochester.

Celibacy through the ages

EDITOR'S NOTE: First in a series.

Links between priesthood and celibacy — the forsaking of marriage to fully dedicate oneself to God's service — are, quite literally, as old as Christianity itself. And, despite several challenges, mandatory celibacy is a discipline that's survived for numerous centuries in the Roman Catholic Church.

The priestly sexual-misconduct crisis has swelled debates over celibacy in recent months, particularly in the United States. Yet Pope John Paul II continues to affirm the permanence of, and the need for, this discipline.

As Canon 277 in the Revised Code of Canon Law states: "Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual conti-

nence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are obliged to observe celibacy, which is a special gift of God, by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and can more freely dedicate themselves to the service of God and humankind."

Two modern-day popes have strongly upheld mandatory celibacy, beginning with Pope Paul VI and his 1967 encyclical, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatu* ("The Celibacy of the Priest").

"Priestly celibacy has been guarded by the Church for centuries as a brilliant jewel, and retains its value undiminished even in our time when the outlook of men and the state of the world have under-

gone such profound changes," Pope Paul wrote. "This law should support the minister in his exclusive, definitive and total choice of the unique and supreme love of Christ; it should uphold him in the entire dedication of himself in the public working of God and to the service of the Church; it should distinguish his state of life both among the faithful and in the world at large."

In a 1993 address on priestly celibacy, Pope John Paul II said this discipline "is a kind of challenge that the church makes to the mentality, tendencies and charms of the world, with an ever new desire for consistency with and fidelity to the Gospel ideal." He added that

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Story by Mike Latona • Photo by Karin von Voigtlander

