BROADCASTER and newspaper columnist Fr Brian D’Arcy has said the Church urgently needs to consider making clerical celibacy optional, as well as ordaining married men and women, *writes Sarah Mac Donald*.

Speaking to *The Tablet*, the Passionist priest, who is 50 years ordained next year, made his comments in the context of falling Mass attendances in Ireland and the lack of vocations to the priesthood.

Referring to the drop in Mass attendance from over 90 per cent when Pope John Paul II visited Ireland in 1979, to 19 per cent in some urban areas today, he said that figure could be as low as 9 per cent if the older age group is excluded. “We have prayed for years, particularly in the western world, for an increase in vocations.

We cannot say that God isn’t listening because we absolutely believe he is. But the vocations are not there, so maybe we are asking God for the wrong gift,” the 73-year-old said. He added: “If we can keep on doing the same thing then we are likely to get the same result; the fact that the result is neither helpful to the Church or priesthood is telling us that we better change our way of doing it.”

Asked about his criticism of compulsory celibacy on the opening day of the National Ploughing Championships in Tullamore last week, which was attended by 97,000 people from mainly farming and rural communities, he said he has always believed clergy should be allowed to get married. “I think compulsorily tying the gift of celibacy with the gift of priesthood is more codology than theology. They are two separate

gifts – they are not the same gift.”

He suggested that compulsory celibacy is based on “an utterly inadequate theology of sexuality” and can lead to an unhealthy emotional life and spirituality. He also highlighted how the Orthodox Church and members of the Ordinariate are allowed to be both priests and married. However, he cautioned against believing that a single issue such as abolishing celibacy or ordaining women would remedy the Church’s problems. “I think all of those things can be looked at, but the answer isn’t going to be found in any one of them alone. We have to look at how the Spirit is working in the Church and I think the Spirit is very apparent in the great lay committed people in the Church.”

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