Moving closer towards ordaining married men

THE now retired Bishop of Portsmouth, Crispian Hollis, last week went public not only with his own belief that we should have married priests, but also with the information that he believed that up to ten of his brother-bishops in the English and Welsh hierarchy felt that "sooner rather than later (the Church) will rightly have to move towards the ordaining of married men". This statement follows hard on the heels of Leo O'Reilly, the Bishop of Kilmore, who wants the Irish bishops formally to establish a commission to discuss this question.

Effectively, the Church now breathes freely, knowing that matters can be aired and discussed. If one had to pick out just one of the innumerable blessings which Holy Father Francis has brought to the Church it is surely that of maturity in discussion.

Indeed, in this particular question of married priests, he has encouraged such discussion, as he has also in the matter of marriage and family life.

It is palpably not his fault if so many bishops continue to keep their own counsel, and seem fearful either of supporting him or contradicting him. This is not grown-up churchmanship.

Gone now are the days when a bishop or priest had to weigh the advantages of silence, which would allow him to continue his ministry of mercy unmolested, against the desire for honest frankness, which would provoke knee-jerk reactions from the Holy Office in Rome, breathing fire and brimstone on any cleric who polluted the purity of ecclesial air by uttering phrases such as 'married clergy', 'Communion for some divorced and remarried', or 'church welcome for gays'. Thank you, Francis. And thank you, Leo and Crispian.

So how do we best move this debate forward? Perhaps by acknowledging two factors.

First, the problem is more serious than may be immediately apparent. Stephen Robson, the Bishop of Dunkeld, recently said that the Church in Scotland is now increasingly looking to the developing world for support as it had once looked to Ireland: "There needs to be the realisation, with humility, that Scotland is now a mission country."

In what was clearly a concerted pitch other Scottish bishops joined in. Archbishop Leo Cushley, in Edinburgh, reminded everyone that "the universal Church (is) by its very nature missionary".

But it took the newly-appointed Bishop of Galloway, William Nolan, to point out that the shortage of clergy is not a self-contained problem; it infects the whole Church. Rejoicing in the promise of priests imported from India, he noted that this was not just a question of priestly numbers, rather "they are coming because they see Scotland as mission territory . . . a country where the Faith is tired and the faithful lack the enthusiastic joy of the first Christians".

Nor can we blame the bishops. When one bishop, fishing for help with a vacant parish, asked me some time ago if I played chess I thought he was offering me a game. But when I told him I did, he simply said that I would be able to understand the difficulty of starting a game without enough pieces.

When parishes lack their own priest they are, virtually by definition, served by a priest on 'overtime', adding them to his already overloaded schedule, one whose first duty is to others. Or by a priest who has retired, because he was already 'past it' as far as full-time devotion to building up a Eucharistic community goes. And as I know to my cost, the problem just gets worse. One parishioner told me recently: "When you first started coming to us we had to remind you to bring your spectacles – now we're telling you you've forgotten your teeth." What next?

Vatican Counsel

Mgr Basil Loftus

And where it is not even possible to provide the same visiting priest each week, the problem is exacerbated; without any continuity in the priest-provision a once thriving parish Eucharistic community rapidly becomes a Sunday Mass-centre for visiting, heterogeneous and often unknown clergy.

It is one thing for Crispian Hollis to tell us that in his retirement "I have been regularly engaged in hugely rewarding supply work in my home diocese of Clifton, filling in for priests who are sick or who need a break". But what is not 'hugely rewarding', and on the contrary is very seriously worrying, is having to go week after week, month after month, year after year, to parishes that don't even have a priest who is absent through sickness or on holiday. They just don't have a priest.

Long interregnums between the transfer of one priest and the appointment of his successor are becoming almost the norm in many parts of Britain.

And the people are fed up with it. It is weakening their faith.

Just as Queen Elizabeth I once said that 'Calais' would be found written on her heart after her death, I am quite sure that if I am opened up they will find there the words of exquisite wisdom spoken to me by an eight-year-old altar-server, and which affected me so deeply: "Thank you for coming, but do you know when we'll get a proper priest?"

Secondly, we can admit that there are already many, many such married priests, ready, available, and anxious to play their part. They are those who earlier left the active ministry in order to marry.

Now in this newspaper the Editor has two features, 'Letters to the Editor', and articles by regular columnists. What I don't think we have had so far, but are about to have if he permits it, is an example of 'Letters to the Columnists'. Amidst the dross of the tired, sad and not uncommonly offensive moanings of a hard-core of backward-looking and self-appointed 'defenders of the faith', which regularly cross my desk, there are other letters which shine a welcome light onto what Karl Rahner called 'The Shape of the Church to Come'. With the writer's permission I reproduce part of one such letter from a married priest, redacted to protect the identity of his family.

"I have spent all my life never once challenging my good Mother Church in her sometimes difficult decisions and rulings. I have always sought to bend to its teachings, but the time has now come to be a little more straightforward and honest.

"I have never so far entertained any thought of asking to be re-admitted to the active ordained ministry. I have preferred to work steadily to re-define the ministries of all the faithful, within the development of which the ministry of the ordained priesthood alone makes any sense. Until now.

"Priests are increasingly needed not only to celebrate the Eucharist, but to lead the community and sacramental life of prayer – to help people to 'contemplate the face of Christ'. The need is for priests to mould liturgy and to build mission-oriented communities. I think I can bring a necessary mission-perspective to the exercise of the priesthood because of work I have done in the secular world. When I was ordained I did not understand what 'mission' meant. My priesthood was for myself. Now it is for others. I desperately wish now to serve the people who have nurtured that realisation within me.

"This flexible interchange between ministries would bring priests and people closer in a proper interpretation of the differing gifts of their common Baptism.

"I have had enough of a Church seemingly intent on self-destruction, with no ears for the promptings of the Holy Spirit. For myself I have been happy to be who I am for many years. I am truly only interested in helping my Church to rise from decay and decline. I am a sinner, grown old in my sins, and totally reliant on the mercy and goodness of God's love in Christ. I want to bring that mercy to those I could serve in the active ordained ministry. As a rehabilitated priest I could bring that conviction to a Church which sorely needs it, a Church which must now re-connect with the truth and let go of clericalism.

"I don't just blame priests for the present dysfunctional state of the Church. I blame those lay-people who allow priests to act with no sense of solidarity with all the baptised, but solely out of a false sense of superiority produced by the overlay of a culture of clericalism – self-lobotomised laity who play deceitful games in order to keep 'Father' in his false consciousness of a clerical Church. I want to bring to that Church the fruits of my wife's long and hard work over many years, as she has tried in the school of love, which marriage is, to eradicate some at least of my personalised and clerical selfishness."

There is much more. But surely that is enough to stir consciences.

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CATHOLIC TIMES
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'Mind of Church' to ordain married men

Kevin Flaherty

A RETIRED bishop said as many as ten bishops in England and Wales are in charge of dioceses so short of priests that they would welcome the chance for the Church to discern whether ordaining married men would be the way forward.

In a letter to *The Tablet*, Bishop-emeritus Crispian Hollis of Portsmouth, said he is increasingly convinced that, "sooner rather than later" the Church in Britain and further afield "will rightly have to move towards the ordaining of married men".

Bishop Hollis said he "recently became involved in a minor way in the work of the Movement for Married Clergy and I am increasingly convinced that, sooner rather than later, the Church in this country and . . . further afield, will rightly have to move towards the ordaining of married priests".

The bishop continued: "Pope Francis has indicated that he is open to approaches by bishops' conferences seeking permission to ordain married men. This is surely the logical step forward and I find this increasingly to be the 'mind of the Church', at least in those parishes where I am pastorally engaged."

He added: "A Church that cannot celebrate the sacraments for the people of God can scarcely be the Church that Christ founded."

In an interview with the Catholic journal, Bishop Hollis said the priest shortage was becoming increasingly urgent and he thought there were probably between six and ten diocesan bishops in England and Wales (out of 22 dioceses) who would welcome the chance to discuss the possibility of ordaining married men.

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News in brief

Bishop: we need to ordain married men

BISHOP EMERITUS Crispian Hollis of Portsmouth has said he is "increasingly convinced" that the Church in Britain should move towards ordaining married men. He made the comment in a letter to *The Tablet*.