

Don't be afraid of an open discussion

LAST November, the bishops of England and Wales met to consider a number of issues. One of those issues was whether the bishops would give permission for wide spread use of general absolution. This was well considered in the article 'Bishop in Holy Year mercy plea for general absolution' (*The Catholic Times*, 1st January). Subsequently a serious question has been raised by Bishop Hollis and others as to whether such permission were necessary in any case. The outcome was negative and an opportunity was lost.

My concern is the other significant matter that was brought to the agenda by Bishop Seamus Cunningham of Hexham and Newcastle, that of celibacy being a pre-requisite for ordination. Before considering the discussion, it is worth noting that Bishop Cunningham took the matter to his fellow bishops at the request of the Council of Priests in his diocese and what is more, reported back in the public domain the

outcome. That must be applauded. It would be to the benefit of all if his example were to be followed.

While recognising that there may well be occasional issues on the agenda that require the delicacy of confidential treatment, I would suggest this particular question is not one of them.

It is already a matter of open debate within our parishes and the lack of considered discussion by the hierarchy with the laity is the cause of exasperation and frustration. No-one has said it is a simple matter to resolve, but resolve it we must on two counts. Firstly the need to recognise that the vocations of marriage and ordination are not mutually exclusive and secondly, an evident need to face the decline in vocations in present circumstances that are only going to get worse in the next ten years. Of course this is not to say that priests must marry, for there will be those who have both the vocation to priesthood and that of accepting a celibate life but it

is a question of recognising the gift that marriage can bring to ministry and to parish life.

In England we are fortunate to have the experience of having a husband and wife in the presbytery. The movement of married Anglican clergy and their families means that a married priesthood is a reality already. To date there has been no uprising of the populace. Quite the opposite, they have been welcomed and their ministry welcomed. There are in fact some 120 ex-Anglican married clergy now serving as priests in the Roman Catholic Church in this country.

Last November, at the conference arranged by *The Tablet* at Ushaw College, Durham, to celebrate 175 years of publication, Dr Michael Winter presented a paper entitled *Catholic experience of married former Anglican priests*. It was an important paper for, to my knowledge, it was the first attempt to gather serious opinion relating to new circumstances for it arose from a



comed by Catholic laity. More than 95 per cent of laity welcomed the priests, and 90 per cent welcomed their wives. This dispenses of the untested lament that "the simple faithful would not be happy with married priests".

The paper further considers financial issues that will inevitably arise. Each individual circumstance is dependent on the journey taken, the gap between leaving Anglican ministry and ordination to the Latin Rite priesthood.

Such men often brought with them a pension from employment as well as a retirement pension from the Church of England.

The conclusion is worth noting. Although it was not asked in the survey, one very important deduction emerges. The experiences of this small pilot group have demonstrated what many had suspected, namely that the Catholic community simply does not have enough money to replicate the Anglican system for employment and remuneration of

married priests. What then is the answer? The vast majority of them will have to be non-stipendiary, that is supported financially by their own salaries or pensions and living in their own houses. Dr Winter suggests two significant benefits will emerge from this format. They will simply have to enlist the laity, and entrust them with serious responsibilities, to keep the whole community functioning. Secondly, the priests will be protected from slipping into the status of a privileged class, remote from the insecurities, sufferings, and simple joys of ordinary people. All in all his presentation was a valuable contribution to a growing debate.

It highlights the need for our bishops to establish a commission for England and Wales to examine the complexity of the issue, to offer opportunity for both priests and laity to make a considered contribution to a debate that is demanding to be heard for the sake of the Church.

It is not sufficient for a decision as important as this to be left on the hard-pressed shoulders of a small group of men.

And it needs to be established sooner rather than later. The data that is already emerging from Ireland, of parishes without priests, amalgamation of parishes and the diminishing number of men offering themselves for seminary training, will be our story too unless we start the conversation. I would suggest that we are already seeing significant signs in that direction.

There is nothing to be afraid of in open discussion, nothing that threatens Church doctrine, just the examination of a discipline that was only formally agreed in 1139, at the Council of the Lateran. It could be changed; all that is required is the will to discuss how this transformation might come about for the benefit of the Church. Will other serving bishops add their voice to that of Seamus Cunningham? I hope so.

Journey in Faith
Chris McDonnell

direct questionnaire to these men now serving as priests in Catholic parishes. Prior to making contact with these priests, Dr Winter approached the diocesan bishops who offered no objection to the survey.

The response was most interesting. The first and most important result of the survey is that of the former Anglican Clergy and their wives have been overwhelmingly wel-

A providential solution to the lack of priests

CHRIS MCDONNELL (*Journey in Faith, The Catholic Times*, 15th January) cites evidence that the Catholic laity have warmly welcomed the ministry of married ex-Anglican clergy.

How could they not be generous to men who have made such a sacrifice for conscience and brought new strength and richness to the Church?

It does not follow, of course, that the Catholic laity would prefer a married clergy (whether *ab initio* or ordained from the ranks of already married Catholics). That is something on which it would be worthwhile for the hierarchy to 'consult the faithful', in Newman's phrase.

It would be very interesting also to see what evidence there is that removing the celibacy law would lead to an increase in vocations.

I suspect (without much evidence) that a celibacy given consecrated purpose (as at present) may even be one of the factors that confirm a man's sense of calling to priestly service, rather than a deterrent.

What worries me about Chris McDonnell's argument is two things. One is his notion of celibate priests as a privileged class remote from the experience of ordinary people. They have all, surely, been somebody's son and they often have married siblings. Many I know are close to their families and under-

stand their situations.

Priests for their part also endure a complex and unusual kind of loneliness: it is hard for them to make close friends, especially with women, and they lack some of the freedoms, not only economic, of laypeople. All this is part of the sacrifice they make for Christ.

The second point is, as Chris says, that the Catholic community lacks the money to replicate the Anglican system for employment and remuneration of married priests. It does so because the Anglican Communion is the established Church of this country, possessed of rich resources.

I am puzzled though that he finds the solution to this problem in the vast majority of a (future) married clergy being supported financially by their own salaries or pensions and living in their own houses. I cannot see how this would be an unqualified 'benefit', either for the priesthood or for the Catholic community. For it would simply aggravate the present difficulties of priests by leaving them even less time for the study, prayer, pastoral outreach and availability that are such vital and valued features of their ministry.

Anyone who has had a demanding career, been married and educated children, knows that it would have been scarcely possible to combine all this with a service that went beyond the diaconate as at present constituted.

The 'marriage' solution to the growing shortfall of priests may be an illusory stop-gap, with the unintended consequence of creating further stresses in the Church's fabric.

What theologians need to start thinking about very seriously now is the ordination of women. Here is the major subject on which to consult the faithful, even if it is welcomed less warmly than the idea of married clergy (of either category). Given their enormous (sometimes preponderant) role in the lay Church, and also their equality with men in education, their emotional intelligence, psychological strength and capacity for selfless loyalty, it may well be that women will prove to be the providential solution to the 'ministerial deficit' that is already upon us.

The issue of celibacy is not insignificant (I have defended its value on these pages before); but it is not the most relevant issue here. I doubt myself that if women were ordained they would find celibacy any more of a burden than male priests do at present.

Like Chris McDonnell, I see no reason to fear the 'open' discussion that has already begun. All I hope is that it will be conducted with lucidity and learning as well as fervour, and always with charity.

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Let's continue open discussion

DR CARL SCHMIDT (*Letters, The Catholic Times*, 29th January) addressed a number of issues that I raised the previous week on the issue of married clergy.

The experience of being a child in a family and of growing up with siblings who later marry, is not comparable to the day-to-day family life of a husband and father. The celibate priest can only be an onlooker however his sincerity in appreciating family life.

Secondly, the loneliness

that he mentions is real and if that leads to it being "hard to make friends, especially with women" that must surely diminish his ministry.

I would applaud and endorse his final comment, that this open discussion "will be conducted with lucidity and learning as well as fervour and always with charity".

With that in mind we can have courageous conversations.

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