

One man, two vocations

17 July 2014 by Chris McDonnell



The possibility of married priests appears to be nudging its way on to Rome’s agenda. Here, a leading advocate of change argues that mandatory celibacy should be set aside

When Pope Francis spoke to La Repubblica last weekend about the possibility of Catholic married priests, his reported remarks about finding a solution to priestly celibacy made headlines around the world. But it is not the first time that the Pope has couched this issue in these terms. Earlier this year, The Tablet reported that Erwin Kräutler, Bishop of Xingu in the Brazilian rainforest, had spoken to Pope Francis about the desperate shortage of priests in his huge South American diocese. And on that occasion as well, it was reported that the Pope was “open-minded about finding solutions to the problem, saying that bishops’ conferences could have a decisive role”.

These remarks were indeed welcome for they indicated that honest discussion of an issue for so long ignored – the option of marriage for priests within the discipline of the Latin Church of the West – is again possible.

Although a male celibate priesthood is associated so strongly with the Catholic Church, it has not always been mandatory. It was only in the mid-twelfth century that the Church of the Roman Latin Rite required the discipline of celibacy of those men wishing to take major orders. In 1139, the Second Lateran Council officially imposed mandatory celibacy on all priests and it has remained a discipline within the Western Church ever since.

In England, the Movement for Married Clergy first came into being in 1975, not to challenge the Church on matters of faith and doctrine but to question the continuing - necessity of this discipline. Members of the movement were, and remain, committed to the Roman Catholic Church as their home.

We have never proposed that all priests should be married but that the “element of choice” should remain with the person who is offering himself for formation and eventual ordination. There will always be those who wish to accept the celibate life as part of their commitment to ordination. However, we do not see the Sacrament of

Marriage conflicting in any way with the ministry of the priest. In fact, we believe that family life might enhance priesthood and ministry and offer a fine example to the Christian community which he serves.

Although there has been a modest rise in entry numbers to the seminaries – last year there were 44 new seminarians, and 39 priests ordained in England and Wales – this will do little to assuage the crisis that is looming. Rather, it offers little more than a replacement to presently diminishing numbers of priests in parishes and presumes that those entering, and so contributing to this increase, will stay the course. Just one diocese gives an indication of how serious the problem is: next year, more than a third of the priests in the Archdiocese of Liverpool will be over 75.

The total number of priests in England and Wales has also been boosted by married clergy. There are a number of individual Anglicans, who were married in their Anglican ministry, being received into the Catholic Church and later ordained, their ministry continuing as married priests. They have been welcomed by our people. In fact, without them we would be in a more difficult position than we presently are.

More recently, we have seen the establishment of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, which has once again highlighted in a very public manner the anomalies permitted in this discipline of the Church. While the additional clergy may be welcome, it is most unwise for any organisation to have its rules applied inconsistently.

At the same time, over the years, many good priests, highly valued by their congregations, have had to resign in order to marry. This has been a great loss to the Church, which, it should be noted, teaches that marriage is an inalienable human right. It is fully acknowledged that in former centuries – and in Eastern Rites today – marriage was, and is, only permitted prior to receiving holy orders. However, we feel that in natural justice and in Christian charity, those men who have left to marry should now be invited to return to active ministry, if they wished.

The solution to the problem of a shortage of priests, so far, has not been to find ways of increasing priestly numbers but for diocesan authorities in England to consider the amalgamation of parishes to be served by one priest, adding greatly to his personal load. The predicted statistics for Ireland are even worse, as Fr Brendan Hoban's recent book *Who will break the bread for us?* so clearly indicates.

In April, *The Tablet* reported that three bishops of England and Wales – the then Bishop of Brentwood, Thomas McMahon, the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, Seamus Cunningham, and the Bishop of Menevia, Tom Burns – had indicated that permission to ordain married men should be widened. Bishop Burns made the point that not only would married priests alleviate a shortage, but they would “further underpin the value of marriage and family life”, and “bring a wider experience and understanding to priestly ministry”.

What of the opinion of other bishops in England and Wales? Was it a matter of urgent concern at the recent meeting of the English and Welsh hierarchy? If it was not on the agenda, it most certainly should have been. After all, Bishop Kräutler reported that Pope Francis had told him that bishops' conferences could have a decisive role in this

matter.

So without waiting for Rome to make a blanket ruling, would it be too much to ask that the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, exercising its collegiality, begins a courageous conversation with a view to meeting our own immediate needs?

The Eucharist is at the heart of the Christian mission. Those called to this sacred ministry should have the choice of living either a married or celibate life, meeting the evident needs of the people they serve. Vocation to priesthood – the answering of a call to ministry – need not be associated with an altogether separate calling to the celibate life. The time has come to revoke a discipline that has become a hindrance to vocation. It is no longer a service to the Church in radically changed circumstances.

Chris McDonnell is a retired head teacher and currently secretary of the Movement for Married Clergy. Further information on the movement can be obtained by contacting chris@mcdonnell83.freeserve.co.uk