

JOE FITZPATRICK

The married priests debate

A lay theologian and writer assesses the arguments for and against the abolition of the celibacy ruling for priests in the Catholic Church.

There has been a considerable correspondence in the Catholic press in recent weeks concerning the ordination of married men. This is put forward as a solution to the problem of the shortage of priests which has caused the closure of a good many churches and the amalgamation of parishes in some dioceses, something that has inflicted real pain and heartache on a lot of the Catholic faithful. Given the age profile of priests at the present time, this situation is likely to get worse rather than better in the foreseeable future.

The call for the ordination of married men has come from a wide variety of people - retired and serving bishops, priests, nuns and religious, married former Anglican priests and their wives, former priests who left the active ministry in order to marry, and so on. Even the retired Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, has said that if he were the bishop of a diocese experiencing a shortage of priests he would petition the Vatican for

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prayerful lives of
dedicated service of a
great many celibate
priests down through
the ages.

been a great help to the Church's missionary efforts in countries in Africa and Asia since single men can travel more lightly and have greater flexibility than married men with families. It is also argued that celibacy releases the priest from the distraction of having to earn a living and that this frees him up to focus on his theological studies, his prayers and other priestly duties; it also makes it possible for him to be ready to

about costs, it is pointed out that those priests who left to get married would probably be self-supporting since they are either in paid employment or they are retired with a pension. They would also have pursued a career that gave them a particular expertise - in education, social work, business, or whatever - that could contribute to the wellbeing of the Church. It is also argued that celibacy played a role in the dreadful scandal of the sexual abuse of children by priests and religious. Not that celibacy caused this abuse, no, but that the celibate lifestyle proved attractive to some people who had paedophile inclinations since it provided an unspoken explanation of why they showed no interest in women. It provided them with a useful cover story and put them in contact with youngsters over whom they had considerable control - the classic recipe found in cases of child abuse. Celibacy might also have played a role in the cover-up of the abuse by bishops and others in authority since the motivation

The season of Advent

different lifestyle from that of married men and women and in this way reinforces the clericalist mentality. But Jesus did not found a two-tier Church; he intended us to be one as he and the father are one (John 17, 11).

Certainly, like any other institution, the Church depends on people performing different roles or functions but these are functional differences only; they do not confer a higher Christian status on any one group or individual. Every baptised man and woman is as much a Christian as the Pope in Rome. That is why the Second Vatican Council's document on the constitution of the Church deliberately placed the chapter on 'the People of God' ahead of the one that deals with the Church's hierarchical structure. The Church is, first and foremost, the community of the baptised and those with particular functions to perform are there to serve this community, to help preserve its unity and fidelity to Christ. I believe that a married clergy would bring bishops, priests and the faithful much closer together in their actual lifestyle and, in this way, prevent the kind of disconnect that has arisen between official Church teaching on marriage and family life, on the one hand, and the actual practice of Catholics, on the other, which Pope Francis's Synod in Rome was desperately trying to remedy and overcome.

There will always be a place for

WILLIAM MCFADDEN

An Advent Reflection

A Catholic priest finds Advent hope in an ecumenical response to a new World Council of Churches' document.

Being a participant at an ecumenical conference does not automatically bring with it a renewed sense of enthusiasm or hope. However, taking part in the conference organised by the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland on the World Council of Churches' document *The Church – Towards a Common Vision*, (TCTCV) perhaps surprisingly did just that.

The participants, coming from the churches involved in the ecumenical instruments in Britain and Ireland, engaged with the document in a manner which was friendly, challenging and inspiring. Reflecting on both the reality of the church, and on our aspirations to be church, we were led to a recognition of demands, diversity and difference.

Acknowledging TCTCV as a convergence document, which seeks to mark the place where we can stand together as well as reflecting where we might find it difficult to talk to one another, we were led to listen to, recognise, and respect the work of the

for the church.

As we enter into the season of Advent, it seems to me that the positive experience of the conference may be a timely invitation to something important. Advent is about new beginnings, it is about joyful expectation, it is about hopes and dreams for creation and for humanity. At the end of the conference when participants were invited to sum up their experience of the 24 hours, they used words like gratitude, joyful, respectful, and hopeful. These are Advent words, and are clearly connected to the questions which arise when we explore what we mean by church unity, when we seek to clarify our vision of church, and when we take seriously our engagement with what structures, if any, are necessary in order to be church.

Advent is undoubtedly a privileged time. The gift of the World Council of Churches of *The Church - Towards a Common Vision* is perhaps an appropriate document to accompany our Advent journey. Opening it up