

Married priests: the time has come!

In 1956, 149 new priests were ordained for the dioceses of England and Wales; fifty years later in 2006 (and from a Catholic population one-third larger), there were only 9 ordinations! Over that same period also, very many priests left the active ministry: estimates vary but it could be as many as 10,000 for England and Wales alone. Already, over one-third of our diocesan priests are over 70 years of age; by 2020, the proportion could be two-thirds. It is as plain as a pikestaff that, unless there is a huge and sudden increase in vocations (much more than the recent extremely modest increase in entries to seminaries), in a very few years the Church in this country will be critically short of priests - priests on whom we depend for the very source of our nourishment in faith, the Eucharist.

A significant proportion of those few ordained in recent years are men who were previously Anglican priests. Without them, our predicament would be even worse. But it is precisely the arrival of these priests which reminds us again of one obvious way to at least turn this ebbing tide. Many of them are married and their presence among us, well received by fellow clergy and laity alike, must cause us to ask the question: if married ex-Anglican priests can become priests, why not married laymen, Catholic-born or converts, also?

For many years, the question of dropping the Church's requirement that all priests be celibate was hardly ever asked - and if asked, was hastily rebuffed by those in authority, with well-honed 'justifications' for maintaining the traditional rule (and it is only a rule, not an article of faith!). Two such reasons were that only a celibate man could devote himself undividedly to serving the faithful, and that Catholic lay people would not accept a married clergy. Clearly not true: our ex-Anglican married priests are just as devoted as celibates to the care of souls (as indeed are married ministers in many other Christian churches, including our own Catholic eastern rites); and most of them have manifestly been welcomed and accepted in our parishes.

But one organisation in this country *has* been consistently calling for a change in the law of mandatory celibacy: the Movement for Married Clergy (www.marriedclergy.co.uk). It was started nearly forty years ago, at a time after the second Vatican Council when change and reform seemed to be in the air - but also as an increasing number of priests were leaving the active priesthood, often because they wished to marry.

This movement seeks, in a spirit of concerned loyalty to the Church, a realistic reform in the criteria for admission to ordination as a diocesan priest, namely that married men of proven worthiness, who experience the call to ministry as priests, be considered for selection, and not exclusively those who have both this *call* to ministry and the spiritual *gift* of celibacy.

Priests did not always have to remain unmarried: in the early Church, most priests, even bishops and some popes, were married - indeed so were most of those we regard as the very first priests, the Apostles. Gradually, the 'ideal' of celibacy emerged, partly for practical reasons (to avoid the Church losing property to the heirs of married priests), but also (and mainly, it has to be admitted) because the married state - and in particular sexual relations - was felt to be incompatible with the 'purity' required of the minister of the Eucharist. This began, incidentally, with the prohibition of intercourse by married priests on the night before the Sabbath, the only day of the week when priests would say mass; but when saying mass daily became the norm, then logically priests could never have sex at all! Also, the increasing prestige of the monastic life, where the monk leaves the world to live in a secluded community - and so is necessarily celibate - began to influence how all priests, including the diocesan clergy, were regarded,

So we are aware of the reasons why, in the twelfth century, the Church finally decided to require all priests to be, and remain, unmarried - even though celibacy is not intrinsic to the diocesan ministry. However, we also believe that those reasons are no longer valid, and that maintaining this obligation in the twenty-first century is not only unwise but severely constrains the life of the Church in our age.

Since Vatican II, the Church has expressed much more positively that for Christians marriage is a noble vocation, in no way inferior to the call to the consecrated celibate life. The earlier mistrust of sexual relations as a necessary but regrettable 'impurity' even in marriage is, hopefully, a thing of the past. In the process the Church has, like society in general, come to appreciate the deep importance of the free and intimate commitment of two persons to each other which marriage represents - and which the great majority of people find essential to their own fulfilment as human beings. However, unlike society in general, our Church continues to hold before its members an ideal of marriage which is much more demanding: unselfish, unconditional love of, and devotion to, another human being for life. Christian marriage, then, is now also a *counter-cultural* witness in our increasingly secular society, and can thus be an even more potent expression of the Gospel message, as much a sign of God's action in our world as is celibacy - or being 'a eunuch for the Kingdom', as Jesus described those 'few' who could remain celibate in their service of God.

Moreover, in *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II's document about the Church, we are offered a fresh view of the different Christian vocations, one which distinguishes between various *ministries* on the one hand and various forms of *holiness* on the other. Inspired by this, we would submit that although many may be called to the *ministry* of the priesthood, far fewer know themselves to be able to give that particular witness to *holiness* which is the consecrated celibate life. Indeed, the capacity to live a fulfilled celibate life is a *gift* given by God - what theology calls a *charism* - and as such cannot be made the subject of mere canonical *obligation* or even of individual *promise*. In this perspective, the combination of the vocation to priestly ministry with the calling to holiness in a Christian marriage is in no way inappropriate.

More practically, the devastating decrease in the numbers of those being ordained or remaining active priests - and the consequent threat to access to sacramental graces for all God's people - is all too evident. Equally threatened is the parish, which remains the best context in which the Christian life can be lived, but which needs an ordained priest at its heart. We need more priests to preserve our parishes: amalgamation into 'super-parishes' because of a shortage of celibate priests is no solution (one recently amalgamated parish in our diocese is estimated to have over 7,000 Catholics!). We are confident that if married men were admitted to the priesthood, the ebbing tide of vocations would at least turn.

The Movement for Married Clergy's objective is a practical one: that the Church - in particular, the Church in England and Wales - open up ordination to the diocesan priesthood to married men of proven worthiness (*virī probatī*). It is definitely not suggesting that all priests should be married: celibacy, freely chosen by those who know themselves to have this *charism*, will continue to be a potent special witness in priestly ministry. 'Celibacy', incidentally, is an ambiguous term nowadays: in our context, it simply means being unmarried. But often it is taken to mean 'having sexual relations'. In calling for the end of mandatory celibacy for priests, therefore, our movement is not contesting any aspect of Catholic moral teaching about sexual behaviour. Allowing celibate priests, after ordination, to marry would be a further welcome step. However, we do believe that among those married men whom the Church should consider are those many priests who left the active ministry and subsequently married, but who know themselves still called to ministry for God's people and would dearly love to be able to serve again. Indeed, accepting such men back would probably be one of the most effective ways, in the short term, to counter the current shortage. Many Catholics would wish our Church to extend the priesthood to women - but that is a battle for another day.

In the recent Family Survey, which our bishops wisely published and invited all the faithful to complete, no mention was made of the matter of obligatory priestly celibacy. We feel that this was regrettable: were married men able to become diocesan priests, the Church would then have a most important additional source of evidence about Christian married family life. Indeed, the already considerable number of ex-Anglican married clergy could have contributed their experience. An opportunity sadly missed - as also is the failure so far of our bishops to publish the results of the Survey, as clearly most Catholics assumed they would.

In the particular case of married Anglican priests becoming Roman Catholic priests in our country, we have telling proof that the two vocations are not incompatible. The Church's readiness to make these now many 'exceptions' surely demonstrates this fact, but it should also prompt it to consider broader reform. The bishops of England and Wales are in an especially strong position to bear witness in the wider Church to the worth of married priests and of their acceptance by the faithful.

We want married priests, but we fully acknowledge the challenges which would be presented to the Church by a substantial increase in the number of married priests, many with families. To put it crudely, celibate priests cost less. A change in the law on celibacy would need to be accompanied by a review of how the clergy are paid for. Most married priests would need to be largely self-supporting financially: 'worker-priests' in fact - or non-stipendiary, as the Church of England calls its many such ministers. But there could be advantages, too - not least an attenuation of 'clericalism' and a closer understanding by the clergy of wider social issues - if many celibate priests were also to have salaried jobs 'in the world'. Of course, if most priests were then to be, in a sense, 'part-time', we would need even more of them. The practical challenges of our objective being realised are significant, but meeting them will also hopefully cause the Church to draw much more deeply on the undoubted professional skills of so many of the laity.

At times, and particularly in recent years, the Movement for Married Clergy's campaign may have seemed to be falling on deaf ears among those in authority in the Church. But now, to our most pleasant surprise, Pope Francis has shown himself open to possible change. What is more, he has indicated that the locus of such change should be in the exercise of collegial authority by conferences of bishops in different parts of the world, responding to local needs as they (rather than Rome) are in a position to know them. Since then, several of our own bishops in England and Wales, with our own Bishop Seamus prominent among them, have publicly expressed their willingness for change - indeed they may be part of a clear majority among their colleagues. The Archbishop of Dublin has also declared his openness.

The Movement for Married Clergy is greatly encouraged by these recent events. As our founder put it, our final aim is to be declared redundant: we believe the Holy Spirit is working to put us out of work.... But not yet: we need to keep the pressure up!

Michael Kerrigan
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