

Celibacy is no longer sacrosanct in Poland

More than half of Polish priests say they would like to marry, while more than a third are said to secretly violate their vows of celibacy. Is it realistic to expect Catholic priests to abstain from sex in today's world?

"I was happy as a young priest, but at a certain moment loneliness began to eat away at me," says Jozef Strezynski (58). He found himself facing a dilemma when he met a woman who he felt strongly about. After sixteen years as a priest Strezynski left the church and married.

"I thought about it for four years before making a decision," says Strezynski, who is now father of two children. "I came to the conclusion that it did not make any sense to remain an unhappy priest."

Jozef Strezynski is not the only one who wrestled with the demands of the priesthood. A Polish sociologist who spoke to more than 800 active priests came to the conclusion that nearly 54 percent of them wanted to live with a woman. More than a third admitted having a sexual relationship with a woman and 12 percent said they had a permanent relationship. Wieslaw Dawidowski, an Augustinian priest in Warsaw, is not surprised by the figures.

"I know a lot of former priests who have left the church. I wouldn't be surprised if bishops had relationships as well. It is only human. So let him who is without sin, cast the first stone."

Father Davidovsky says that celibacy can no longer be taken for granted in the Polish Catholic Church. The need for a relationship reflects changes in a society which has grown more free and secular since the fall of communism.

"Being celibate is no picnic. Which is why I always tell young men that they should think it over carefully. They have been raised to believe that being a priest is something beautiful which requires sacrifices. However, nowadays the priesthood isn't that cool anymore."

Married life

Sexual abstinence by priests is an inseparable aspect of the Catholic teachings. Having a married life could be in the way of the union between the priest or pastor and God. Furthermore, a fear of nepotism and hereditary functions within the church have cited as arguments to introduce and uphold celibacy.

Celibacy is not an original doctrine and was not introduced until the Middle Ages, journalist and church scholar Adam Szostkiewicz emphasises. He is expecting that the falling interest in becoming a priest will make the debate flare up again:

"It is an absurd idea to continue with the celibate for the Catholic church, when even in Poland, possibly the most Catholic country in Europe, seminaries are getting emptier and emptier. I'm not expecting any changes under the current Pope, Benedict XVI, but something will have to change after him."

For the foreseeable future, married priests will remain a taboo within the Polish Catholic Church.

"It is a mistaken belief that a priest who founds a family and lets go of the celibate would be committing treason to God. I think it is the other way around: someone who refuses to live a double life, but who is honest towards the one he loves and towards god, is taking a heavy burden, but at least he's honest."

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by Thijs Papot

<http://www.radionetherlands.nl/currentaffairs/region/europe/090203-priests-marriage>