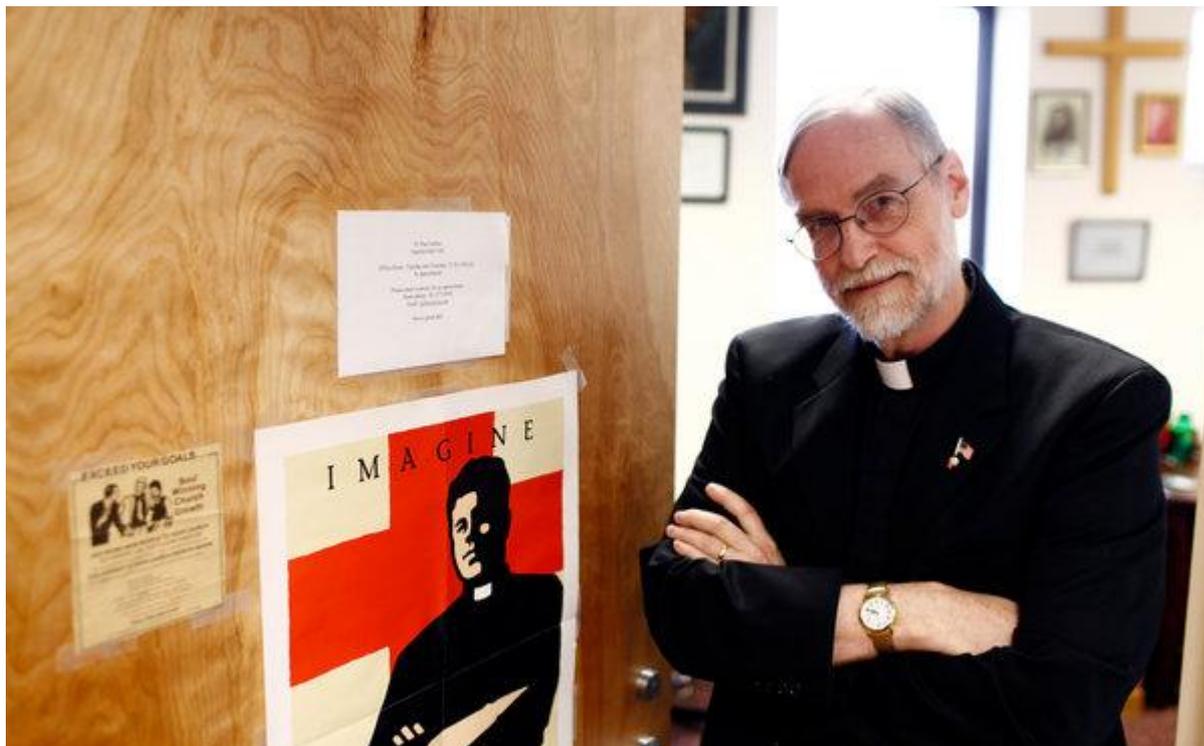


A Cohort of Married Roman Catholic Priests, and More Are on the Way



On New Year's Day, the Vatican announced the formation of a nationwide ordinariate — kind of a diocese without borders — for Episcopal priests and their congregations who want to move together into Roman Catholicism. The big news is not that some Episcopalians will have a zippier express lane into Catholicism, but that there will soon be even more married Catholic priests in America.

And married priests raise provocative questions for the Catholic Church, whose shortage of clergymen is worsening by the day.

Most Americans, perhaps most American Catholics, do not know that the church allows married priests. But there have always been married priests in the non-Latin rites, like Ukrainian Catholicism or Maronite Catholicism. These churches are fully Catholic, obedient to the pope, but they ordain married men, although they do not allow unmarried priests to get married.

There were always some married priests in Roman Catholicism, too, until the First Lateran Council, in 1123, banned the practice. And there have been married Roman Catholic priests again since 1980, when the church said that Protestant clergymen who became Catholic priests could stay married to their wives.

There are about 80 such Catholic priests in America, says the Rev. D. Paul Sullins, a sociologist at Catholic University in Washington. Once an Episcopal priest himself, now a married Catholic priest, Father Sullins has interviewed over 70 married priests, and many of their wives, for a book he is writing. A vast majority are former Episcopalians, he says, though some came from other Protestant denominations.

The small cohort of married priests raises several questions. First, are they doing as good a job as other priests? If the church has decided that celibacy confers certain gifts on priests, does it follow that married priests are worse at serving their congregations? Second, wouldn't celibate priests be a little resentful of colleagues who get to serve the church and have sex too? And third, if the married priests are doing a good job and not provoking envy, why keep the celibacy rule for priests in general?

To answer the first question, it is important to understand the rationale for the celibacy rule. ("Celibacy" refers to a life without marriage; "continence" is the term for living without sexual activity. In principle, celibate priests are also continent.) The church has never taught that celibacy is necessary to the priesthood. Rather, the tradition holds that that a priest performing the sacraments represents Jesus Christ, who was single. This idea of the priest in persona Christi, in the person of Christ, is also a prime rationale for why women cannot be Catholic priests.

Furthermore, Father Sullins says, there is the practical belief that "if a man's not married, he's able to devote himself more fully and exclusively to his parish." But he has found that married priests are usually aided, not hindered, by their wives, who are very committed to the parish. And he adds that celibate priests can be less accessible than married priests.

"The truth is that celibate priests often have ways of walling themselves off," Father Sullins says. "If you call a celibate priest's rectory in the middle of the night, you'll likely get an answering machine. But if you call a married priest in the middle of the night, and he is disinclined to go out, he will get an elbow from his life partner, saying, 'Hey, you committed yourself to this work.'

"I don't want to say the difference is great, but if there is a difference, it's in favor of the married priest."

Since 1980, the Roman Catholic Church has shown a preference for celibate clergymen by preventing married priests from being pastors of parishes, unless circumstances dictated it. The priests entering the church as part of the new ordinariate for former Episcopalians will be exceptions to that rule. And because of a shortage of priests in the United States, circumstances have already put married priests in charge of parishes.

In fact, the Rev. James Parker, the very first married priest admitted under the Pastoral Provision, as the church's 1980 rule is known, led a parish in Charleston, S.C. And apparently he did a good job.

"He was just a brother among brothers," says the Rev. Jay Scott Newman, who pastors a church in Greenville, S.C. Father Parker's marriage "was never an issue, not for a second." And he was able to do his job well, just like married men in other demanding professions.

"Doctors who work 80 hours a week manage to have children," Father Newman says. "It can be done. And these priests did it as Anglicans" — the broader church of which Episcopalians are part.

Father Newman's hearty praise for his married colleague helps answer our second question, that of envy. I found no evidence that celibate priests resent their married colleagues. Although a small number of theologians and canon lawyers have been critical of the 1980 Pastoral Provision, it seems that working priests are not troubled.

Even Father Newman, for example, who believes celibacy is an important countercultural statement — a celibate priest "has staked his life on the premise that this life is not all there is, and he is putting his flesh on the line" — says the church can accommodate exceptions. Referring to another married priest he knew in South Carolina, Father Newman said, "there was an intuitive grasp

among everybody that this was an exception to the norm, and there was no injustice being done to lifelong Catholics who became priests knowing celibacy was part of that.”

The church’s general position on priestly celibacy, that it is ideal but not necessary, is weakened if some married priests seem pretty close to ideal. And as the priest shortage worsens, celibacy will be debated again.

At least 25,000 Americans have left the priesthood since 1970, Father Sullins says. Many of them expected the church to lift the celibacy rule, but when they realized the rule was staying, they left and got married. Twenty-five thousand former priests — in a country with fewer than 40,000 priests today. Celibate or not, all Catholics can do the math.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/07/us/married-roman-catholic-priests-are-testing-a-tradition.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0