

A married priesthood would right many wrongs

12 April 2014 by Alex Walker

Pope Francis has indicated he is open to the possibility of allowing married priests, but as *The Tablet* **reports this week**, he says it is up to individual bishops' conferences to reach a consensus on the issue first and then petition Rome.

Francis made these startling comments to Bishop Erwin Kräutler, a visiting Austrian bishop who works deep in the Amazonian rainforest and has 300 deacons and only 27 priests for Brazil's largest diocese, Xingu, where many Catholics can only receive the Eucharist a couple of times a year.

Coming from South America, Pope Francis will understand more than most about the need for priests and the nurturing of faith through the celebration of the Eucharist because there are many dioceses there in the same situation as Bishop Kräutler's.

If the celibacy rule were lifted, a large number of the 300 deacons in Xingu could consider priesthood and therefore have the ability to preside at the Eucharist and the other Sacraments.

In England and Wales there are 2,282 secular priests and 788 deacons. Some of these deacons will have a calling to priesthood. Although the Church won't release the figures, the support group Advent estimates that in the last 50 years as many as 10,000 priests in England and Wales have left ordained ministry in order to marry.

Some have argued that a drought of vocations to the priesthood is because of a lack of faith on the part of the faithful; we do not need to change the rule concerning celibacy, rather we need to increase the faith of Catholics so they hear the call of Jesus to serve him in the priesthood.

Others argue, and I would be one, that there is no shortage of candidates for the priesthood, but there is a shortage of celibate candidates for the priesthood.

The Church's insistence on a celibate priesthood is starving the vast majority of Catholics today. Jesus' imperative of "Feed my Lambs, feed my sheep" is being frustrated for the sake of the discipline of a celibate clergy.

There are priests like myself who when leaving the priesthood to marry went through the long and painful process of applying for dispensation from clerical celibacy. Others refused to put themselves through the ignominy of the process and simply married in a register office.

The terms of the dispensation stipulate that we cannot even serve the Church by preaching, distribute Communion, teach in higher education or hold any kind of pastoral office, and we have to keep away from places where we were known as priests. Some priests would consider returning to active service if their rescript of dispensation from clerical celibacy were rescinded .

The Catholic Church in England and Wales, via the establishment of the Ordinariate, has proved that a married Catholic priesthood is not only possible and acceptable to the vast majority of Catholics but brings with it an additional dimension to the priesthood.

Now that Pope Francis appears to be giving greater authority to bishops' conferences they need to be brave in finding a solution, in consultation with their dioceses, to the shortage of priests and offering Pope Francis and the Church a way forward. It has been staring them in the face and requires courage and belief that a married priesthood working alongside celibate priests will not bring the Church to its knees but could enrich it.

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