

MARRIED PRIESTS?

In this article Fr. Dwight Longenecker gives his take on the issue of married catholic priests. He was an Anglican cleric but is now a married catholic priest with children looking after his own parish.

He said: 'Today I had a conversation with someone which has been repeated numerous times': "Father, you are so good with the children, and you understand marriage first hand. Don't you think the church should allow priests to marry?"

The Church continues to uphold the fine and ancient tradition of priestly life-long celibacy.

It is the discipline of the Western Church that clerics are celibate, but it is a discipline which could be changed. St Paul hints at this in I Cor. 7.25. But should it be changed? Bishops were obliged to be celibate from the 4th century onwards and priests from the 11th. So celibacy has a long tradition. But in today's day and age should the church allow its priests to marry if they so wish? A lot of people think so.

Some say that the mandatory vow of celibacy is one of the greatest deterrents to increased vocations. But I would say that if mandatory celibacy were dropped vocations wouldn't dramatically improve. It would also mean that a priest would have to juggle with two jobs making him far less effective as a priest on the one hand and less available to his family on the other. The crises in vocations has little to do with celibacy and far more to do with the secularization of our culture. Less children per family is also a major contributory factor.

Fr Dwight goes on: "Believing that married priests are the answer assumes that they are mature, happily married men. I'm afraid marriage does not automatically make a man mature, self-giving and happy. In my experience of married clergy in both the Evangelical Churches and the Anglican Church it is not the magic bullet. Remember married men are not perfect. Married clergymen are workaholics. Married clergymen are immature. Married clergymen have affairs. Married clergymen have drink problems. Married clergymen struggle with same sex attraction and abuse children. When a clergy marriage breaks down it is usually disastrous and scandalous and the hurt and pain ripple right through the whole church. I don't mean to paint a horrible picture of married clergy - just reminding people that it's not all quite as happy and wonderful as they seem to think".

So having married clergy will not necessarily solve the vocations crisis, nor will it necessarily improve the priestly ministry, and it certainly won't be the solution to any personal problems the priest may have. And don't forget with having married priests there will also be quite a number of divorced priests. That in itself would undermine the catholic priesthood as a whole.

Fr Dwight continues: 'There are other practical problems. Catholics say they want married clergy, but do they want to pay for them? I can get by because I work two jobs, parish priest and school chaplain. In addition to this I speak and write and Mrs Longenecker works. Not all married priests and their families can do this.

I think the only movement there may be on this in the future is that the church may decide to ordain some older, married deacons. But the faithful should think it through carefully. Yes, celibacy may not suit every priest. But believe me, there will be equal if not greater problems if we have married catholic clergy'.