

Celibacy Isn't the Issue

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“Rent a Priest,” the brochure states. I look in disbelief, wondering if this is some joke, only to read on and realize it isn't. The brochure encourages me to call 1-800-PRIEST-9 and use married priests when none of the celibate kind are available. I see that the brochure is published by CITI—Celibacy Is the Issue.

I have mixed feelings about the arrival of this particular brochure at my parish. I am pastoral coordinator for a parish without a resident pastor. I have been in this position for the past 10 years. This is my second parish. As pastoral coordinator I provide for all the daily pastoral care and administration of the parish. Being in the position of having to, in a sense, “rent a priest” at times when the priests who normally provide sacramental service for my parish are unable to do so. I found this brochure disturbing. Those times that I have had to call around for priestly services I have done my best to keep it from being a situation of renting a priest—bringing in this warm male celibate body to say the magic words and perform the ritual. The fact that these other warm male bodies are not celibate does not make the idea of “renting a priest” any less distasteful.

The problem that I have with renting any priest, married or not, has to do with community: “Where does the community fit here?” “What kind of connection does this priest have to the community being served?” In my situation I have been fortunate in getting priests who have either had prior experience with my community or whom I have known and worked with before. I try to bridge any gap that might exist between the community and the celebrant. This is not ideal, but it is making the best out of the situation. Ideally the celebrant at the sacred mysteries would be one who shares in the daily life and struggles of the parish, but since this is not always possible, I do my best to provide for the pastoral needs of my parishioners and be a bridge for them in sacramental matters.

My other question is, “What about the connection with the wider church?” The priests who serve at my parish are in good standing with the diocese or their religious order. They bring with them a sense of connection to the universal church that is also important to my community.

I can certainly sympathize with the pain of these men who are no longer allowed to function fully as priests in our church. I experience the same pain when I walk with my people, share in their joys and sorrows, but then at the moment of the sacraments, have to step back and bring in a rent-a-priest. But this is the reality of the Catholic Church at this time. I participate as fully as I am able in the celebration of the sacraments and focus on the many ways I can minister that far outnumber the restrictions placed on me.

I would welcome the ministry of married priests in my parish, but not for sacramental ministry until such time as they are able to do so in full union with the church. They could visit the sick, teach classes, lead prayer services. There are always many more needs than I can begin to fill.

CELIBACY ISN'T *THE* ISSUE.

Celibacy is just one of many issues facing our church. Allowing for a married clergy would relieve the current priest shortage in our country. It would be an easy quick solution. But if we move too quickly to a solution without allowing the full range of possibilities to be explored, we may have a short-term solution with no real change. The greater issue addresses the role and nature of the priesthood and ministry: what the face of ministry in the future will be and who will be those ministers. Perhaps the church of the future will have a mixed clergy, male and female, married and celibate. Perhaps the role of lay ministers will continue to expand and grow alongside a celibate clergy. I would not like to see the development of lay ministry be cut off prematurely by too quick a move to a married clergy. Perhaps the role of the diaconate will expand to include women.

Whatever the shape of ministry in the church in the future, it needs to be rooted in the community served and yet attached to the wider, universal church. Vatican II addressed and expanded the importance and role of the community in our church. The priest is not meant to be one who is called from nowhere, has no tie to the community, does his magic and then leaves. I would welcome a married clergy, male and female, but never rent-a-priest.

What God intends for the church is yet to unfold. In the meantime we live in the creative tension of that unfolding, with all of the struggles, joys and pain that come with this.