

NTR

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S.

Would Ending Celibacy Make a Difference in the Number of Priests?

With the publication of petitions by diocesan clergy last year, calling for a reconsideration of obligatory celibacy as a requirement for the diocesan clergy, a number of bishops stated that lifting the requirement of celibacy would not make a difference in the number of priests in the Catholic Church. They point to a number of Protestant denominations who, in spite of having married men and also women in the clergy, still suffer a shortfall in the ministry. How much of a difference would ending obligatory celibacy make? Is there anything we can learn from the experience of Protestant clergy in the United States?

In the denominations that require theological training prior to ordination, it is indeed true that some of the mainline denominations are experiencing shortages. It has not been the case with the Episcopal Church, largely because their liturgical tradition attracts former Roman Catholics as well as others to the ranks of the clergy. But for many of the others, it is indeed the case. There are three factors that seem to contribute to this.

First, denominations with many small rural congregations have the situation that

the congregation cannot support a full-time minister. To have to cobble together several congregations, or hold additional employment in order to care for a family, has led to fewer ordination candidates interested in this kind of ministry. Rural congregations in denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America usually provide the first call to a pastor, i.e., the first site of employment after graduating from the seminary. As the rural population in the Midwest, the heartland of Lutheranism, continues to dwindle, fewer congregations can afford a full-time pastor. Consequently, candidates are not attracted to them.

Second, salaries for full-time ministers can fall short of family needs. This is exacerbated in the first years of ministry by the debt load that many seminary graduates carry from their master of divinity degrees. At one time, denominations provided generous support for seminary students. Since the late 1970s, that support has largely disappeared. The salary one gets as a parish minister in many denominations does not match the level of education the minister has achieved and had to pay for. This problem is heightened further by

Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S., is the Vatican Council II Professor of Theology at Catholic Theological Union and professor of theology and culture at the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

the fact that sometimes the pay of ministers was partially in kind. Thus, for many years, the United Methodist Church provided a manse for the pastor and his or her family to live in. While this seems to be good at first glance, it carries a problem. By not owning their own home, ministers lose equity against which they can borrow in order, say, to send their children to college. Given the demands that middle class living lays on couples and their families today, this situation becomes a real problem. The Orthodox priests face the same problems. They often have small congregations, and many of the Orthodox churches do not have a tradition of giving, since the state took care of the Church in the old country. Many Orthodox priests have to hold down a second job to support their families.

The third issue is status. Serving as Christian clergy in the United States does not give one the status it once did. A number of factors seem to be at play in this. One obvious factor that has driven down status has been scandal: the scandals around televangelists in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the sexual abuse scandal among Roman Catholic clergy. How much secularization is a factor in the declining status of clergy remains hard to gauge. Church attendance has fallen somewhat in recent years, although it is still far higher than in other secularized countries, including Canada, our neighbor to the north. Most of the mainline Protestant denominations have been posting declining numbers each year for the past two decades, with little periods of leveling off or rising from time to time. The nondenominational megachurches continue to grow in size. The Roman Catholic Church does as well, although immigration seems to be the major cause of this.

Another, more neuralgic factor appears to be influencing lower numbers of clergy in mainline Protestant denominations. Over

the past forty years, nearly all of them have admitted women into their ministry. Indeed, in their seminaries, women have for some years constituted half or more than half of all seminary students. The fact that the number of male students has therefore drastically declined, and the total number of clergy has declined, even given the dramatic increase in the number of women being ordained, only underscores that things are changing.

That women are entering the ministry in these numbers may also explain the decline in status in another way. Other professions in American life, such as elementary school teaching, librarianship, and (at an earlier date) nursing were, in the nineteenth century, primarily male occupations. Sociologists have theorized that, as a profession becomes filled with more and more women, the number of men entering the profession declines. The profession becomes, following the old saw, women's work. This may be a factor also in the lower status that ministry now has. It illustrates how patriarchy is hard to eradicate in American society.

So where does this leave the Roman Catholic discussion about ministry? First, the average size of Catholic parishes is considerably greater than that of Protestant congregations. And Catholics tend to be more urban and suburban dwellers than rural, as is the case with a number of the larger Protestant denominations. Thus, having a parish large enough to support a resident pastor should generally not be a problem.

But the salary issue, now felt in many Protestant settings, is likely to be even greater among Catholics. Catholics can look to an historical lesson in their own tradition. Thirty years ago, it became apparent that the Catholic school system would have to change dramatically when it lost its teaching corps of low-paid women

religious. Even today, when adjustments have been made, Catholic school teachers still make considerably less than their colleagues in public schools. Many young Catholics begin with great idealism to teach in Catholic schools, but discover at some point that they cannot support their families, and have to seek employment in better-paying positions. Were the obligatory celibacy rule to be lifted, a parallel pattern might develop in parishes. Priests would not be able to support themselves and their families on the salaries given, or would decide to seek non-parochial employment as their families reached college age. Catholics do not support their church financially at anywhere near the same per capita level as do their Protestant counterparts. Funding would have to become a major part of any discussion moving toward a different configuration of the clergy.

What about the status question? According to statistics from CARA, the research agency based at Georgetown University, women make up 63 percent of all lay ministers in the Catholic Church today. If a feminization of the ministry role is setting in for Catholics, would this have a negative effect on the numbers—men and women—that could be recruited to the ministry?

The question is not easily answered. The same statistics show that 72 percent of the candidates in lay ministry formation programs are forty years of age or older. This would seem to replicate the picture in Protestant circles, where the largest numbers of women continue to come from middle age or second-career cohorts. The advantage of having older people in ministry is the wealth of experience they bring. But certain ministries, such as youth ministry, might be harder to sustain.

No one can predict the future. What should be clear is that lifting obligatory celibacy for priests will not of itself solve the problem of a shortage of parish priests in the United States. For that to happen, significant other things will have to happen as well. It will require thinking how funding of these positions will take place. And it will have to grapple with the unsavory problem of preventing the feminization of professions that has happened elsewhere, if the Church wants to keep a significant cohort of men in the ministry. That more women would be attracted would be a great advantage. But if the number of men who enter the ministry drops dramatically, we may simply reverse the gender problems we have now.