

A MESSAGE FROM THE ARCHDIOCESE OF MILWAUKEE

Q. We were always taught that married men could not be ordained Catholic priests. How is it possible that we could have a married Catholic priest here in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee?

A. Celibacy is a discipline of the Catholic Church practiced universally in the West. Although it is highly valued, Pope Paul VI stated that celibacy "is not, of course, required by the nature of the priesthood itself. This is clear from the practice of the early church and the traditions of the Eastern rite churches."

Much has been said about practical reasons for celibacy, such as giving the parish priest more time to dedicate to the children of God, etc. When all is said and done, however, we must understand it as a powerful sign of the presence of the kingdom of God. It is not essential to the priesthood, but it is a radical witness to the reign of Christ in the world.

In the West the church eventually adopted the practice of celibacy as a universal discipline. The East, however, never did. Even today Eastern rite priests, in their native lands, may marry before ordination. This historical situation opened the doors to the possibility of a married clergy in the West under certain circumstances—most notably for those whose lifelong traditions allow for a married clergy. This includes certain Protestant traditions.

Q. When did the Catholic Church begin this practice of ordaining married clergymen from other churches after they became Catholic?

A. In his 1967 encyclical, "Of the Celibacy of the Priest," Pope Paul VI called for a study of the circumstances of married ministers of churches or other Christian communities separated from the Catholic Church and of the possibility of admitting those who desire full communion to the Catholic priesthood and to continue to exercise ministry.

Pope Pius XII had already granted special permission for some married Lutheran clergy to be ordained to the Catholic priesthood shortly after the Second World War.

In a 1980 statement, Pope John Paul II allowed an exception for married Episcopal clergy who wanted to become Catholic priests. This process known as the "Pastoral Provision" was intended to ease the way into full communion with the Catholic Church for Episcopal clergy and, in some cases, their local communities. A Delegate in the U.S. was established to coordinate this process and serve as the link with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican office responsible for overseeing the Pastoral Provision and handling the dispensation process to allow for ordination of married men to the priesthood.

Q. Does this mean that the Catholic Church will begin ordaining married men on a regular basis?

A. No. The ordination of a married man remains an exception and one that is granted only in very specific cases involving men who had already been called to ministry in another church or Christian denomination and later came into full communion in the Catholic Church.

Q. Is this practice of married priests wide-spread in the United States?

A. There are approximately 300 active priests in the United States who are married. Without exception they came to Catholicism from other churches. They formerly served the Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Methodist churches as ordained ministers. At some point they felt the call to communion with the Catholic Church and entered a process of transition. They and their families entered into full communion with the church, and the former Protestant ministers petitioned Rome for permission to be ordained as Catholic priests. They are now active in priestly ministry throughout the country.

Q. Has this practice evolved over the last 36 years?

A. Yes. Originally this practice only applied to men who had been Episcopalian/Anglican clergy. It also involved the situation of whole parishes coming into full communion along with their minister. They were even permitted to use adapted liturgical practices that borrowed from their Episcopalian roots. Over the years, petitions from ministers from other Protestant denominations were considered and permission granted.

Q. If they were already ministers in their own denominations, why does the Catholic Church ordain them?

A. The Catholic Church does not recognize priestly ordination in other churches as valid.

Q. If these men were trained to be ministers in another denomination, how can we be assured that what they teach and preach is truly Catholic?

A. Men seeking to be ordained under these provisions undergo a theological evaluation. Their knowledge of seven subjects is evaluated by a team of experts. The areas tested are: Ascetical Theology, Canon Law, Church History, Dogmatic Theology, Liturgical and Sacramental Theology, Moral Theology, and Sacred Scripture.

Based on this evaluation, a prescribed plan of studies is assigned on a case-by-case basis. After the syllabus is completed the candidate is required to pass one written and one oral exam in each of the seven subjects noted above over the course of 4 days.

Q. Is it up to the diocesan bishop to make the final decision to admit the man to Holy Orders?

A. The diocesan bishop is required to present the case to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican. A dossier of at least 13 required documents is submitted, including a petition for a dispensation from the impediment of marriage that stands in the way of the ordination. The actual dispensation can only be granted by the Holy Father.

Q. Does this mean that the Catholic Church will now allow priests to marry or that priests who left ministry to marry will be able to return?

A. No. There is historical evidence and contemporary practice that demonstrates that married men have been ordained. However, there is no tradition in the Church of allowing someone to marry after ordination. In fact, should one of the married priests become widowed, he is not permitted to marry again. Also, in keeping with long tradition, a married priest is not eligible to be ordained a bishop.