



## VOTF Position on Optional Celibacy

In 2007, Voice of the Faithful asked U.S. bishops to discuss optional celibacy for the priesthood as a way to address some of the problems facing the Roman Catholic Church. Since then, while an increasing number of Catholics, including bishops, are re-evaluating the need for optional celibacy, there remains no coordinated, public assessment within the Church. During that same time period, the number of priests available to serve Catholic faithful has continued to decline. Voice of the Faithful therefore now asks the Bishops of the United States to request the right to ordain married Catholic men using the same Pastoral Provision that has allowed the ordination of married Episcopalian and Anglican priests to the priesthood in the Roman Rite.

### ***Brief Background***

Voice of the Faithful was formed in the wake of the revelations about extensive child sexual abuse in Boston in 2002. One of our goals is to support the victims and survivors of clergy sexual abuse and to protect children from future abuse. As we have worked towards this goal and pursued our mission, we have increasingly seen what many researchers and analysts have concluded: that the clerical culture of the Church is a root cause of both the sex abuse that occurred and the cover-ups that extended the abuse and betrayed the abused.

We believe that mandatory celibacy is a lynchpin of a clerical culture that regards the ordained as inherently superior to the laity. Thus, when accusations of sex abuse arose, those steeped within a culture of clericalism refused to acknowledge that priests could be guilty of such crimes or that bishops would enable them.

This clerical culture allowed abusing priests to hide behind their collars and status to groom children for abuse. This same culture has allowed bishops to demand secrecy of victims and survivors and to transfer abusing priests from parish to parish and diocese to diocese where they could abuse again—all in the misguided aim of protecting the Church from scandal and protecting the financial assets of the dioceses.

There is no one magic answer to preventing such abuse in the future. But the ordination of married Catholic men to the priesthood would provide one counterbalance to this clerical culture. Married priests with children and even grandchildren—and their wives—would have a greater sensitivity to the potential abuse of children. They would be more willing to report abuse and suspected abuse by their fellow priests.

In addition, the existence of married priests alongside celibate priests would enhance the eschatological sign of celibacy, which would be freely chosen by the latter rather than a requirement. Married priests in loving relations with their wives and children would provide a

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human model of loving relations, and together with celibate priests would provide an opportunity for alternative vocations to the priesthood.

Against this backdrop, in 2007 the Board of Voice of the Faithful supported a call to discuss optional celibacy. Now, in 2011, we are calling for the ordination of married Catholic men to the priesthood in the United States. This change would support all three of the goals of VOTF:

- ❖ Support for survivors of clergy sexual abuse
- ❖ Support for priests of integrity (the majority of whom support a married priesthood)
- ❖ Helping shape structural change in the Catholic Church

The request also is in accordance with two resolutions approved unanimously by the Board of VOTF in October, 2010:

1. “A primary lens through which the Board will consider VOTF initiatives is the impact of the initiative on reducing clericalism, which is a root cause of the clergy sexual abuse scandal.”
2. “Mandatory celibacy is a contributing factor impacting clericalism and therefore VOTF endorses optional celibacy as a step to reduce clericalism for diocesan priests in the Latin Rite.”

### ***Basis of Our Petition to the Bishops of the United States***

In a 2010 study commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate compared the increase of Catholics in the U.S. with the decline in the number of priests from 1965 until 2025. In 1965, the report noted, there was one priest for approximately every 780 Catholics. By 2010, there was one priest for every 1,640 Catholics. If the CARA projection remains consistent, in 2025—less than 15 years from now—there will be one priest for every 6,150 Catholics.

The declining number of priests and the burgeoning growth of the Catholic population, coupled with the closing and combining of parishes, ensures that fewer and fewer Catholics will have regular access to the Eucharist in coming years.

Lack of access to the Eucharist is not just a crisis, it is a disaster. Thus far, the only solution that the American bishops have offered for this disaster is to close and combine parishes and convert aging and already stressed priests into circuit riders.

Is there any way to turn this disaster around within the context of current canon law?

The answer is “yes” if the American bishops have the will and the courage to ask the Vatican for the right to ordain married Catholic men. They could do so using the same “Pastoral Provision” procedures that have allowed the ordination in the Catholic Church of married Anglican and Episcopalian clergy.

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Canon 1042 states that it is a simple impediment to ordination if a man has a wife. But Canon 1047 states that the Apostolic See can grant dispensations from this simple impediment on a case-by-case basis. Indeed, the See has used this latter canon to ordain married Anglican and Episcopalian clergy as priests in the Latin Rite.

In addition, several American Bishops have successfully appealed to the Vatican for rescripts to ordain married clergy from other denominations such as Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists and Presbyterians.

These actions demonstrate clearly that the existence of ordained married men in the priesthood is acceptable to the Vatican, at least for those originally approved as ministers of other Christian denominations. Surely Catholic married men are no less deserving of such consideration.

We respectfully request that the United States Bishops petition the Vatican for the right to use this same Pastoral Provision to ordain married Catholic men to the priesthood in the United States.