

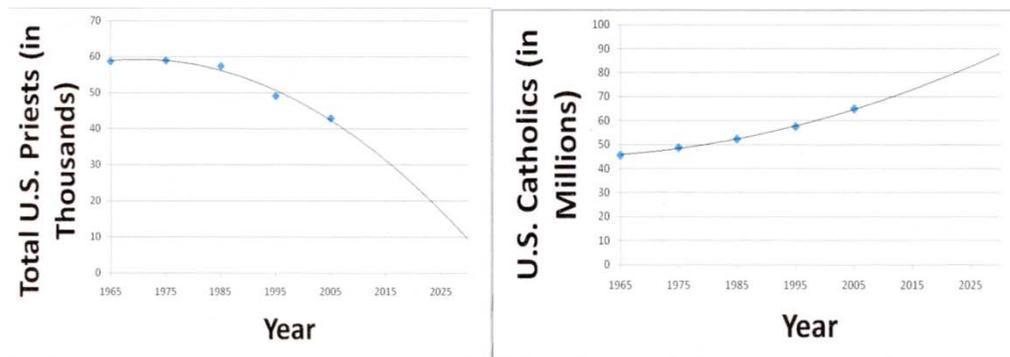
A Petition to the American Bishops for the Ordination to the Priesthood of Married Catholic Men in the United States

“I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever; the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world. ... He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal and I will raise him up on the last day.” — John 6: 51 & 54

Every Catholic understands the need for spiritual nourishment, especially for the regular reception of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. We yearn for the holiness that comes from being nourished by the Eucharist. We also understand the responsibility of the bishops and priests to make the Eucharist available to the faithful.

“The Christian faithful have the right to receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the word of God and the sacraments.” — Canon 213

Sadly, with the decline in the number of priests and the dramatic increase in the number of the faithful in the United States, the Eucharist will be less frequently available to many in the coming years. The 2010 study of priests and faithful, conducted under the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate included this chart:



Projected trends based on data from Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate- “*Catholic Data, Catholic Statistics, Catholic Research,*” <http://cara.georgetown.edu/bulletin/index.htm> [accessed 1/ 10].

According to CARA, in 1965 there was one priest for approximately every 780 Catholics. In 2010 there was one priest for every 1,640 Catholics. If the above projection proves true, by 2025 there will be one priest for every 6,150 Catholics. Although we believe in the power of prayer that God will send candidates for the priesthood, there is no way

to turn around these statistics in the next 15 years without a policy change such as that proposed by Voice of the Faithful in this petition. The declining number of priests, the burgeoning growth of the Catholic population, and the closing and combining of parishes, ensures that fewer and fewer Catholics will have regular access to the Eucharist in the coming years.

Accordingly, Voice of the Faithful respectfully asks the American Bishops through the USCCB, in order to satisfy your pastoral role in making the Eucharist available, to petition the Vatican for the ordination to the priesthood of married Catholic men in the United States.

In his defense of priestly celibacy in the encyclical *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus*, Pope Paul VI acknowledged that virginity “is not, of course, required by the nature of the priesthood itself. This is clear from the practice of the early Church and the tradition of the Eastern Church.” Therefore, both precedent and tradition permit a non-celibate clergy.

The ordination of married Catholic men to the priesthood would provide one counter-balance to the clerical culture that many see as a major contributing factor to clergy sexual abuse. Married priests with children and even grandchildren—and their wives—would have a greater sensitivity to the potential abuse of children. They could provide extra eyes and ears to assist the bishop in monitoring the concerns of all the faithful for the safety of children.

Celibacy that is freely chosen can provide to a skeptical and secular world a strong witness to the eschatological sign beckoning the people of God to the coming Kingdom of God. However, mandatory celibacy lessens the value of the witness of freely chosen celibacy. The presence of married priests alongside celibate priests who freely choose the unmarried state can only enhance the witness that is presented by those who freely choose the option of celibacy.

The ordination of married Catholic men could easily be allowed by applying the same procedures used in the Pastoral Provisions that have allowed married Episcopalian, Anglican and other Protestant clergy to be ordained in the Roman Catholic Church.

We are asking the American Bishops to seek Vatican approval for the use of one of the following two options.

1. A New Pastoral Provision

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) would petition the Holy See to grant a new pastoral provision in favor of the grave ministerial needs of the Catholic faithful resulting from the scarcity of celibate priests in the United States. The new

provision would operate in a manner similar to the current pastoral provision. Under the current provision, in response to the request of a sponsoring bishop, the Holy See may grant a dispensation from the simple impediment of Canon 1042, #1, i.e., “a man who has a wife” to a married former Episcopal sacred minister who is a candidate for the Catholic priesthood. Once a rescript for ordination has been received, the sponsoring bishop may proceed to the ordination of the candidate when all other conditions established by the bishop have been satisfied.

The new pastoral provision would operate in a similar manner except that the candidate seeking ordination to the priesthood would be a married Catholic man, rather than a married former Episcopal sacred minister.

Other rules presently in place might apply where appropriate. For example, the candidate would need a sponsoring bishop who would express his intent to ordain a candidate to the priesthood following receipt of a rescript for ordination from the Holy See. In addition, under the new pastoral provision, the permission of the candidate’s wife would be required and an appropriate course of study and formation for the priesthood would be established by the bishop depending on the background of each candidate.

2. Support for the Actions of Individual Members of the USCCB

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops might choose to refrain from any action of the entire body to request a general permission from the Holy See. In this case, the USCCB might resolve to provide fraternal support to bishops who individually might seek from the Holy See dispensations from the simple impediment of Canon 1042, #1, to permit the ordination of married Catholic men for their dioceses.

This model parallels closely the actions of individual bishops who have petitioned the Holy See and received rescripts for the ordination of sacred ministers of Christian communities which are not embraced by the current pastoral provision—for example, married former ministers of the Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches.

Support in this instance might include the use of both personal and material resources available to the USCCB: to develop common guidelines for requesting dispensations on behalf of married Catholic men, to make available the expertise of staff in individual dioceses as needed by the bishops who choose to seek permission from the Holy See, to assist in the development of curricula, and to prepare appropriate information and educational materials for the media and for the faithful.

Conclusion

The response of thousands of married Catholic men who have applied for the Permanent Diaconate over the past 50 years provides evidence that there are married men in the ranks of the American faithful who would make excellent candidates for the priesthood. Certainly, in every diocese there are mature married men, with children or even grandchildren, who possess a deep Eucharistic spirituality and might consider ordination in order to provide the Eucharist to the faithful. We respectfully request the American Bishops to seek to make the latter possibility available to married Catholic men in the United States.