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U.S. bishop okay with married priests for Eastern churches

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 13, 2010 NCR Today

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tArchbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit, which has a large community of Christians belonging to various Eastern churches from the Middle East, said he would not be opposed if those Eastern churches decided to ordain more married priests in North America.

tBoth Vigneron and Archbishop Thomas Collins of Toronto also said, however, that bishops from Eastern churches do not seem to have a consensus on such a move.

tThe comments came during a press conference today organized by the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and the Canadian Catholic media network ?Salt and Light.?

tYesterday, Archbishop Antonios Aziz Mina, a Coptic prelate from Egypt, argued in favor of extending the practice of married priests in the Eastern churches during the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: Index of stories from the Synod [1].

?Since the 1930s there has been a ban on the ordination of and the practice of the ministry by married priests outside the territories of the Patriarchy and the ?Historically Eastern regions,? Mina said.

?I think, in line with whatever the Holy Father decides, that the time has come to take this step in favor of the pastoral care of the Eastern faithful throughout the diaspora,? he said.

Asked what he thinks about that, Vigneron said he would be inclined to defer to what the bishops of the Eastern churches recommend.

?The question is what will help the bishops, priests and the members of the Eastern churches in the expansion,? Vigneron said, adding that some Eastern Catholics prefer the term ?expansion? to ?diaspora.?

?If it helps them, it would be fine,? Vigneron said, referring to the ordination of married priests for the Eastern churches. ?If they feel it?s not helpful, I would pay most attention to that.?

Since the issue arose in the synod, Vigneron said he?s talked to several Eastern bishops about it, and ?they don?t all have the same view.?

Asked directly if he would worry that more married priests in the Eastern churches might call into question the obligation of celibacy for Roman Catholic priests, Vigneron said, ?I would not.?

Collins said that it?s a ?complex issue? and that ?there?s not a common view? among the Eastern bishops.

Vigneron added that he?s not sure the ordination of married priests for the Eastern churches in America and elsewhere would require special papal permission, since, he said, the bishops of those churches often say ?they already have that authority under the Code of Canon Law for the Eastern churches.?

Archbishop Terrence Prendergast of Ottawa, Canada, who?s not participating in the synod but who took part in today?s press conference, said that in some cases, exposure to married Eastern priests can cause confusion among Roman Catholics in the West.

?We have some chaplains in our Catholic high schools who are married priests from the Ukranian church,? Prendergast said, speaking of Ottawa. ?The children obviously know that, and it can become a difficulty or a tension point.?

tVigneron and Collins took much the same position on another idea floated yesterday in the synod, which is allowing the Patriarchs of the Eastern churches to exercise jurisdiction over communities outside their traditional territory. Both said the Eastern bishops themselves appear to be divided on the issue.

tMonsignor Robert Stern, secretary general of the CNEWA, who?s also participating in the Synod for Bishops, said he?s picked up a variety of opinions during the coffee breaks.

t?Some say it?s good that the authority [of the patriarchs] is restricted, because their culture is in the Middle East, and they wouldn?t understand the Canadian or American point of view,? he said.

t?Others argue that if they?re never exposed to those points of view, how will they ever broaden their perspective?? Stern said.

tYet another proposal floated yesterday was for a ?bank? of priests willing to serve for three months to a year in the Middle East, as a partial remedy to chronic shortages of clergy. Both Vigneron and Collins said they?re in favor of allowing their priests to serve, but expressed doubt that a ?bank? is the best way to go about it.

tCollins said a priest?s decision to serve on an overseas mission is always "deeply personal,? and perhaps can?t be organized or structured in terms of a ?bank? available to go anytime and anyplace. Vigneron expressed skepticism that three months to a year would really allow a priest enough time to absorb the culture and the language in order to be effective.

tVigneron said that a joining a religious order such as the Franciscans, which already has a significant presence in the region, would be a ?more well understood and easier way? for a priest wanting to serve in the Middle East.

tOn the broader question of whether the synod can do anything to arrest the emigration of Christians out of the Middle East, Stern said that the issue ?isn?t in the hands of the church.?

tThe decisions by Christians to stay or go, he said, depend on ?politics, peace and justice, class and social discrimination, [and] extremism,? all of which aren?t really in the power of the church to control.

tVigneron suggested that the synod may nevertheless be able to make a contribution at the level of raising consciousness, and not just on behalf of Christians but all the peoples of the region.

t?The pastors of the church can speak to people of good will to invite them to take a stance on behalf of human rights,? he said. ?The truth of human dignity doesn?t belong just to the Christian community. It?s vital and important for all people of the Middle East.?

t?The Christian community,? Vigneron said, ?can invite others to stand with us on the basis of the truth of the dignity of the human person.?

NCR's coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East can be found here: http://ncronline.org/mideast_synod

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