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British Catholic legislators ask pope to relax priestly celibacy rule

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service | Mar. 27, 2013
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Twenty-one Catholic members of Parliament have written to Pope Francis to ask him to relax the rule on priestly celibacy for Latin-rite priests.

The members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords said in a letter Monday to the pope that the rule should be changed to allow married men to be ordained priests where pastoral needs required it.

They suggested it was unfair to allow married former Anglican ministers to be ordained as Catholic priests in England, Wales and Scotland while the church insisted on the celibacy rule for Catholic candidates in those countries.

The letter did not suggest that serving priests should be given permission to marry, and the legislators proposed that the celibacy rule be retained for bishops, as in the Eastern Catholic churches, which allow priests to marry.

They said retaining celibacy for bishops "would signal the continuing high regard we have for those who are able to live a genuinely celibate life."

"Your two predecessors, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict, guided we are sure by the Holy Spirit, generously permitted the ordination of married Anglican clergy as Roman Catholic priests," said the letter, released to the media Wednesday. "These men and their families have proved to be a great blessing to our parishes.

"Based on that very positive experience we would request that, in the same spirit, you permit the ordination of married Catholic men to the priesthood in Great Britain," said the letter by members of the Catholic Legislators' Network UK.

It continued: "In recent years we have been saddened by the loss of far too many good priests. If the celibacy rule were relaxed, there would be many others who would seek ordination, bringing great gifts to the priesthood."

The letter was signed by such senior Catholic peers as Lord (David) Alton of Liverpool, an internationally respected human rights and pro-life activist, and Baroness (Patricia) Scotland, the attorney general for England and Wales under former Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

It was also signed by Paul Murphy, a Labor Party member of Parliament who served in former Prime Minister Tony Blair's Cabinet as secretary of state for Northern Ireland, then as secretary of state for Wales.

The letter said: "We recognize that the church is serious about the new evangelization and the need to renew the Christian faith in our secular societies.

"As such, one of our priorities must be to ensure that parishes have priests to administer the sacraments;

therefore, we believe that allowing married priests is desirable and imperative," it added.

The letter concluded: "In the first instance, based on the Anglican precedent and the desirability of subsidiarity, it would be logical and greatly welcomed by the faithful if you were to consider permitting our bishops in England and Wales and in Scotland to ordain married men where they believe it would meet the pastoral needs of the local church."

Priestly celibacy is a tradition that developed in the church in the first millennium before it was codified in the Lateran councils of the 12th century. It is a discipline of the Latin church, not a doctrine.

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