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Catholic, Orthodox bishops push for more married priests

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jun. 11, 2014
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Top Catholic and Orthodox church officials in North America are calling on the Vatican to let married men become priests in Eastern rite Catholic churches, another sign that optional celibacy could become a front-burner issue under Pope Francis.

Eastern rite Catholic churches have a look and feel similar to Eastern Orthodox churches but are loyal to Rome and fall under the pope's jurisdiction.

Like Eastern Orthodox churches, Eastern rite Catholics tend to have more local autonomy than their Roman Catholic counterparts, and they have particular liturgies and customs that date back to their origins in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

One of those customs is optional celibacy. While Eastern rite Catholic bishops cannot be married, the priesthood is open to married men.

The main exception has been in North America, where a 1929 decree by the Vatican effectively barred married clergy in Eastern rite churches. The move was spurred by concerns among leaders of the much larger Roman Catholic church in the U.S. that having married priests in Eastern Catholic churches would prompt Roman Catholics to demand a similar practice.

The decision was controversial even back then. A century ago, Eastern Catholic immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Middle East brought with them the tradition of a married priesthood, and the Vatican decree "resulted in divisions in Eastern Catholic communities and even in families," leaders of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation said in a statement issued Friday.

The rationale for maintaining the U.S. ban has been losing ground in recent years as Rome introduced exceptions into its own laws to allow married converts from some Protestant churches to be ordained as priests.

In calling on Rome to reverse the 1929 policy, leaders of the Catholic-Orthodox group from the U.S. and Canada highlighted the ecumenical implications of the ban, noting that the Eastern Orthodox churches also allow married clergy.

"This action would affirm the ancient and legitimate Eastern Christian tradition and would assure the Orthodox that, in the event of the restoration of full communion between the two churches, the traditions of the Orthodox Church would not be questioned," the group said.

There are about 500,000 Eastern rite Catholics in the U.S. and nearly 70 million Roman Catholics. Eastern Catholics worship in more than a dozen different churches, such as the Maronite, Armenian, Chaldean, Syriac and Ukrainian traditions. There are about 750 Eastern Catholic priests compared with just under 40,000 Roman Catholic clergy in the U.S.

But Friday's statement on celibacy for Eastern Catholics has an import that goes beyond those numbers.

For one, the Catholic delegation to the consultation is headed by Archbishop Joseph Tobin of Indianapolis, who worked in the Roman Curia for many years. Tobin's reputation as a moderate earned him few fans under Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, but Francis is said to respect his judgment.

In addition, all the Catholic members of the group are appointed by the conferences of bishops in the United States and Canada.

Moreover, Francis has sent signals that he is open to optional celibacy. In February, he gave permission for a married Maronite Catholic to be ordained in St. Louis, the first ordination of a married man in the Maronite Catholic Church in the U.S. in a century.

Francis also told a visitor in April that he would be open to discussing optional celibacy if national bishops' conferences "make concrete suggestions."

In a news conference last month, in response to a question about revisiting the celibacy rule for all Roman Catholic priests, Francis cited the example of Eastern Catholics to note that "since it is not a dogma of faith, the door is always open."

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