NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Los Angeles archdiocese loses a precious resource

Mario T. García | Jan. 9, 2012 NCR Today

A few days ago, the story broke that Bishop Gabino Zavala of the Los Angeles archdiocese had fathered two children who are now young teenagers and living with their mother in another state [1].

As a result of this revelation, Bishop Zavala has resigned as auxiliary bishop serving a predominantly Latino area of the larger Los Angeles metropolitan area. This is a real tragedy, especially because Zavala is a highly progressive liberationist who has promoted Catholic social doctrine and social justice issues, including the interests of Latino Catholics and the immigrant community.

He has served as president of Pax Christi USA, which advocates world peace. He has worked against capital punishment and has supported immigration reform that would allow undocumented immigrants to regularize their status. His resignation and forced departure from his position of influence leaves a major gap in church leadership, especially among the majority Latino Catholic population of the L.A. archdiocese.

At the same time, I don't want to neglect the fact that Bishop Zavala acted irresponsibly by his actions. We don't know the extent of his relationship with his two children or with their mother, but it appears that one of the factors that brought this story to light was the complaint by the mother that Zavala was not providing for the education of their children, including their future college education. In response, the archdiocese has agreed to provide for the college education of the children. Zavala should have thought of this after one child, and certainly after the second one. Some have also noted that the bishop was caught in a contradiction in that by calling on other Catholics to obey church doctrines on marriage and parenthood, he, himself, was acting contrary to these doctrines.

But what is being ignored in press reports and by the archdiocese is the very notion of celibacy for Catholic priests by the church. Zavala might have acted foolishly and irresponsibly, but he was also acting as a human being with sexual needs that were being repressed.

I can just hear my critics saying, "But that was what he agreed to by making the vow of celibacy." It's always interesting to hear lay critics call on others to do what they themselves would not do -- in this case, forgo a healthy sexual life.

Celibacy is not natural and is not even based on scripture. The church has to re-examine this critical issue. Indeed, the rule of celibacy in many ways is one of the root causes for the recent sexual abuse scandals in the church. Why can't we have married priests with families serving us?

At the same time the Zavala story broke, the Vatican issued a new ruling that would make it easier for priests of the Anglican/Episcopalian church to become Catholic priests even though they are married and have children. So why is it okay for these priests to not be celibate and wrong for Zavala and other Catholic priests? I feel for Bishop Zavala, for his children and for their mother, but I also hope that out of this tragedy a more sober conversation can begin about the rule of celibacy in the church.

Because of the antiquated celibacy law, Latino Catholics have lost a great resource, and a family lost the nurturing presence of a father.

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[1] http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/05/local/la-me-catholic-resign-20120105