

## **Catholics can open priesthood, gain souls**

Dennis Byrne

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*My guess is that the American Catholic Church would see a resurgence beyond imagining if it welcomed women and the married into the priesthood. No one expected that Pope Benedict XVI on his recent visit to the United States would announce that he was overturning the centuries-long church tradition that closed the Catholic priesthood to women and married men. But some of the faithful can't be blamed for hoping that the change will come in their lifetimes.*

I hope that the pope has returned to the Vatican with some lasting impressions of the American Catholic Church: its tremendous vitality despite the disturbing loss of clergy over the last several decades, and the yearning of the laity for an even more invigorated church that an upsurge in the number of priests would bring to it.

There are reasons against a change in the policy. One invokes Christ's intent, which he demonstrated by his own chaste and single life and the inclusion of men only among his apostles and at the Last Supper. We have to rely on interpreting his intent because it is not recorded, as far as I know, that he said with encyclical-like clarity that only men and single people could serve as priests.

The fact that he gathered mostly men around him as his disciples might have had something to do with the culture of his times: Men ran just about everything.

So, does Christ intend to carry on that system because it was the custom 2,000 years ago? Consider: If he and his disciples customarily traveled only by donkey and fishing boat, would it be right to assume that he meant that priests today could only travel by donkeys and fishing boats? Are we to assume that Christ intended that the chemical makeup of chromosomes would determine who was qualified enough to bring more souls to him through the priesthood?

On its face, it seems ludicrous. Why should he limit the spread of the faith and redemption in such a superficial way? Why should he leave more than half of the faithful out of this glorious and blessed work? Some might argue that (1) priests are special and therefore (2) they must be men. The logical connection between the two statements leads one through tangled thickets of illogic.

Before Benedict became pope he was quoted as saying about expanding the priesthood by accepting women and married priests: "The first question . . . is: Are there true believers? And then comes the second question: Are priests coming from them?"

Quality over quantity, as it were. Except for two problems. The first is shocking in its assumption: If the test for priesthood is "true belief," how can it be said that male true believers outnumber female true believers? If anything, from my observations, the reverse is the case. Second, as the priest who gave the homily in my parish said last week

(while making a different point), sometimes numbers do count. The more priests, the more people coming to know Christ. How can gender differences be more important than that?

Ministering to the faithful is a high calling, and you cannot so easily dismiss the argument that you get better priests if they are not diverted by concerns of family and flesh. Chastity is a great virtue, testing one's discipline and elevating one's holiness. What greater surrender is there than devoting yourself wholly and completely to the priestly vocation? But, those virtues are as equally available to women as they are to men. Women, even married couples, can choose to be chaste. Those who wish to achieve this special higher level of holiness flowing from the chaste and single life are free to do so, voluntarily. Their holiness or their effectiveness is in no way diminished by opening the priesthood to those who have been joined in the sacrament of marriage and whose oneness has been celebrated in the blessed act of sexuality.

It is hard for me to imagine a God who would say it is more important to limit who will be priests based on genetic makeup than it is to bring as many souls as possible to eternal salvation. Why would he do so?

Some would argue that opening the door to women and the married would send the priesthood down a slippery slope. But that slope is not more slippery than the one the single, male priesthood has brought us.

*Dennis Byrne is a Chicago-area writer and consultant. [dennisbyrne.blogspot.com](http://dennisbyrne.blogspot.com)*

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