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Eastern Catholics explain tradition, value of married priests

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In Eastern Christianity -- among both Catholics and Orthodox -- a dual vocation to marriage and priesthood are seen as a call "to love more" and to broaden the boundaries of what a priest considers to be his family, said Russian Catholic Fr. Lawrence Cross.

Cross, a professor at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, was one of the speakers Tuesday at the Chrysostom Seminar in Rome, a seminar focused on the history and present practice of married priests in the Eastern churches.

The Code of Canons of the Eastern (Catholic) Churches insist that "in the way they lead their family life and educate their children, married clergy are to show an outstanding example to other Christian faithful."

Speakers at the Rome conference -- sponsored by the Australian Catholic University and the Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at St. Paul University in Ottawa -- insisted the vocation of married priests in the Eastern churches cannot be understood apart from an understanding of the sacramental vocation of married couples.

"Those who are called to the married priesthood are, in reality, called to a spiritual path that in the first place is characterized by a conjugal, family form of life," he said, and priestly ordination builds on the vocation they have as married men.

Cross and other speakers at the conference urged participants to understand the dignity of the vocation of marriage in the way Blessed John Paul II did: as a sacramental expression of God's love and as a path to holiness made up of daily acts of self-giving and sacrifices made for the good of the other.

"Married life and family life are not in contradiction with the priestly ministry," Cross said. A married man who is ordained is called "to love more, to widen his capacity to love, and the boundaries of his family are widened, his paternity is widened as he acquires more sons and daughters; the community becomes his family."

Fr. Basilio Petra, an expert in Eastern Christianity and professor of theology in Florence, told the conference, "God does not give one person two competing calls."

If the church teaches -- as it does -- that marriage is more than a natural institution aimed at procreation because it is "a sign and continuation of God's love in the world," then the vocations of marriage and priesthood "have an internal harmony," he said.

Petra, who is a celibate priest, told the conference that in the last 30 or 40 years some theologians and researchers have been making a big push to "elaborate the idea that celibacy is the only way to fully configure oneself to Christ," but such a position denies the tradition of married priests, configured to Christ, who have served the church since the time of the apostles.

Fr. Thomas J. Loya, a Byzantine Catholic priest and member of the Tabor Life Institute in Chicago, told the conference it would be a betrayal of Eastern tradition and spirituality to support the married priesthood simply as a practical solution to a priest shortage or to try to expand the married priesthood without, at the same time, trying to strengthen Eastern monasticism, which traditionally was the source of the celibate clergy.

He called for a renewed look at what the creation of human beings as male and female and their vocations says about God to the world.

Fr. Peter Galadza of the Sheptytsky Institute told conference participants that the problem of "cafeteria Catholics" who pick and choose which church teachings they accept is found not just among Catholics who reject the authority of the church's leaders; "those who believe they are faithful to the magisterium" also seem to pick and choose when it comes to the church's official recognition of and respect for the Eastern tradition of married priests.

"We know we are only 1 percent of the world's Catholics, but Eastern Catholics have a right to be themselves," he said.

"As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, we hope the same Holy Spirit who guided the authors of its decrees would guide us in implementing them," he said, referring specifically to Vatican II's affirmation of the equality of the Latin and Eastern churches and its call that Eastern churches recover their traditions.

"There has been a long history of confusing 'Latin' and 'Catholic,'" he said, and that confusion has extended to an assumption that the Latin church's general discipline of having celibate priests is better or holier than the Eastern tradition of having both married and celibate priests.

The speakers unanimously called for the universal revocation of a 1929 Vatican directive that banned the ordination and ministry of married Eastern Catholic priests outside the traditional territories of their churches. The directive, still technically in force, generally is upheld only when requested by local Latin-rite bishops.

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