News



Seminarians pray during a Holy Hour for vocations Jan. 20 at St. Patrick Church in Bay Shore, New York. The service, which invited young people to pray for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life, was sponsored by the vocations office of the Rockville Centre Diocese. (CNS/Long Island Catholic/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Peter Feuerherd

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Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese wrote in March that Pope Francis was ready to reconsider obligatory priestly celibacy. Reese wrote the pope was only waiting to be asked by bishops.

"If the people of God want married priests, they need to let their bishops know. The pope is waiting for the bishops to ask," wrote Reese.

NCR reader James Stubenrauch took up Reese's challenge. And he brought along 52 other friends who reside with him at Dominican Village, a retirement community on the grounds of the Dominican Sisters Motherhouse here on Long Island.

A petition composed by Stubenrauch asked Rockville Centre Bishop John Barres, the local ordinary, for the church to "move without delay" in allowing ordination of married men to the priesthood and asked Barres to "make every effort to advance this important proposal."

The petition was mailed to Barres in June, after Stubenrauch spoke in favor of his proposal at a discussion group on social and religious issues held Tuesday mornings at Dominican Village.

Dominican Village has some 200 residents, almost all of them Catholic, although the facility is open to all faiths. Many followed the path of suburban postwar growth, being raised in Catholic parishes in Brooklyn and Queens and raising families on Long Island, where many were involved in parish life.

The management at Dominican Village noted that the petition was the idea of the residents who supported it, and that management has no position on the issue.

Stubenrauch, 93, is a World War II veteran who, upon his return from the service, met his wife, Jeanne, at the local parish library in Queens (his sister advised him to check out books and the librarian). They have been married for more than 60 years, and moved to Dominican Village a year ago after raising three sons on Long Island.

As a churchgoing Catholic, Stubenrauch observed how many Long Island parishes, which used to have three or four priests, are now down to a single pastor, even after an influx of foreign-born clergy have been added in recent years.

He thought that Barres, installed as bishop of Rockville Centre just this year, might be open to change to address the situation.

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Petition signers said they are interested in the issue because other religious groups are open to married clergy and because a change in church discipline could result in more access to the Eucharist and greater flexibility in Mass times.

"Why shouldn't we be the only ones that don't allow married priests?" asked Lois Kuta.

The solution of importing foreign-born priests has its drawbacks, petition signers told NCR.

Many have difficulties with English and understanding American culture and expectations.

Deacon Don Zirkel, retired editor of the Brooklyn Tablet diocesan newspaper, is a petition signer and Dominican Village resident who works with a foreign priest on his English skills. The priest preaches regularly but lacks command of English at this point, said Zirkel.

Petition opponents included those who argued that it didn't go far enough because it didn't address ordaining women, said Zirkel. Others argued against a married clergy because they feared increased costs incurred by the need to support families.



Bishop John Barres of Rockville Centre, New York, lays hands on Deacon Ralph Colon during the ordination of permanent deacons June 3 at St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

"Some of us are waiting for Vatican III," said Stubenrauch, who said that the church needs to be democratized beyond a "pay, pray and obey" model to involve more laity. Others in the group argued that the church's resistance to change is a reason why many of their children and grandchildren no longer attend Mass.

Barres responded to the petition this month with a letter addressed to "Residents of Dominican Village." He wrote, "It is a blessing to observe people with fervent faith in our Diocese who are concerned about the needs of the Church. I certainly will bring your concerns to my own prayers and reflection."

He asked the group to pray for issues affecting the church on Long Island, including gang violence, care for immigrants, religious liberty and evangelization. He did not mention priestly celibacy.

The response was a disappointment, said the petition signers.

"He overlooked it [celibacy] and put his own issues first," said Kuta.

Noted Stubenrauch, "He completely ducks the issue we brought up."

The group plans no more formal correspondence with the bishop about priestly celibacy. But perhaps something else will emerge out of their Tuesday morning discussion group.

[Peter Feuerherd is a correspondent for NCR's Field Hospital series on parish life and is a professor of journalism at St. John's University, New York.]

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