News



Cardinal Kevin Farrell of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, center, carries a palm frond in procession during Palm Sunday Mass celebrated by Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 9. (CNS/Paul Haring)



Sarah Mac Donald

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Marriage ministry needs to be done by married couples because priests have "no credibility in this area," Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, told a church gathering.

Delivering the keynote address to 500 delegates from the Diocese of Down and Connor at the Faith and Life convention in Belfast Sept. 30, Farrell discussed Pope Francis' 2016 apostolic exhortation "Amoris Laetitia" ("The Joy of Love") and appealed to parishes to establish study groups on the document and to train couples to teach, prepare, guide and accompany married couples.

On the role of priests in marriage accompaniment and preparation, he said they had "no credibility when it comes to living the reality of marriage" even though they may know the principles, the philosophy and the theology.

Speaking to Catholic News Service afterward, the Dublin-born former bishop of Dallas said parishes would have to be prepared to train laypeople for such a role, which he saw as a new model of accompaniment in line with the pope's vision for the church.

"You can't have laypeople just talk about marriage unless they are trained to do it," he said. Training was not purely about having knowledge but also having the ability to communicate and act as an agent of pastoral concern to accompany couples through the challenges they face, he explained.

Ministering by couples to couples is better done by "people who have walked in their shoes," the cardinal said. He admitted he did not "have a clue" how to answer some of the questions on couples' difficulties, which his own nieces and nephews had put to him.

"I have no experience of that and the majority of priests don't have that experience," Farrell said, noting that many of the married couples who attended the 2014 and 2015 Synod of Bishops on the family insisted that more lay couples be involved in marriage ministry.

The prelate also staunchly defended Francis, rejecting any suggestion that he is guilty of spreading heresy in his writing and addresses.

"No, he is not a heretic," Farrell said when asked about the recent filial correction of some of the pope's teachings about marriage published by several dozen priests, scholars and writers. The group was particularly concerned about access to the sacraments for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics.

He added that the traditionalist Catholics behind the filial correction "use any excuse just to attack him."

Farrell also said he is working with the pope on the upcoming World Meeting of Families in Dublin in August and a papal visit.

During his address, Farrell told delegates that people must not judge the conscience of others while demanding that the church refuse communion to politicians who do not fully uphold church teaching. Recalling his time as an auxiliary bishop in Washington from 2001 until 2007, he said the cathedral had no parishioners but was attended by dozens of politicians.

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"It was a crazy time; the cardinal archbishop used to get tons of mail every day about this person who should be put out of the church," he recalled.

Asked about some who have called for politicians who support abortion to be refused communion, Farrell told CNS afterward that although he believed their stance was wrong, the church is "for those who have sinned" and that redemption is for all.