News



Pope Francis poses with members of a Bavarian Orchestra from Augsburg, Germany, at the end of his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Wednesday, Oct. 2, 2019. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Vatican City — October 2, 2019

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A top Vatican cardinal has expressed skepticism about ordaining married men to address the priest shortage in the Amazon, defending the value of priestly celibacy on the eve of a big Vatican meeting where the issue is officially up for debate.

Cardinal Marc Ouellet held a rare press conference Wednesday to launch his book "Friends of the Bridegroom: For a Renewed Vision of Priestly Celibacy," which speaks openly about the challenges facing priests today amid a decline in vocations and reputational damage from sex abuse scandals.

Ouellet, a Canadian who heads the Vatican's bishops' office as well as the Holy See's commission for Latin America, acknowledged that the Amazon region was suffering from a priest shortage and that he was open to debate about how to address it during this month's Amazon synod.

But he said he was skeptical about the proposal to ordain married men, noting that the region doesn't even have enough catechists to teach lay people about their faith, much less train indigenous deacons or priests.

"I ask myself the question. I am skeptical. And I think I'm not the only one," he said. "And above me there is someone who is even more skeptical who has authorized the debate, and that's OK," he said, in an apparent reference to Pope Francis.

The Oct. 6-27 synod is shaping up to be one of the most controversial of Francis' pontificate. Officially, the meeting will address a range of issues relating to the Amazon, including environmental concerns over the rapid deforestation of the rainforest and the pastoral needs of indigenous peoples.

But the issue that has garnered the most attention is a proposal in the working document to consider studying whether married elders could be ordained priests, so that indigenous Catholics in far-flung communities could receive the sacraments more regularly, since many can go months without seeing a priest.

Ouellet's skepticism is significant, given he is a top Vatican adviser to Francis, knows well the reality of the Latin American church, and is by no means part of the anti-Francis group of conservative cardinals, bishops and laity who oppose the synod agenda.

Ouellet strongly defended the value of the celibate priesthood, noting that the sacrifice of men who give up having a family to become priests is in and of itself a powerful and "incomparable" witness of evangelization that the Catholic Church needs today.

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