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by NCR Staff

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January 31, 2020
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In case you missed the news a few weeks back, Cardinal Robert Sarah announced that he and Pope Benedict XVI coauthored a book together on the value of celibacy in the priesthood. However, shortly after the announcement, Benedict removed his name from the book. The scandal is that Pope Francis is considering opening up the priesthood to married men, especially in the Amazon region, where priests are hard to come by. And this is not the first time that Benedict has spoken out in some form

while enjoying retirement. In response, theologian Massimo Faggioli wrote about the institution of "pope emeritus," while theologian Richard R. Gaillardetz said the saga shows the need to rethink norms for retired popes. Meanwhile, NCR columnist Jamie Manson thinks women should be in charge instead. Letters to the editor on the whole drama follow below. They have been edited for length and clarity.

"There's only one pope and his name is Francis."

Massimo Faggioli aptly describes this tragic situation when he cites, "the church here continues to come dangerously close to schism."

I was raised in the old tradition that when "father says," you saluted and did it. Times changed and then we learned about clergy abuse. While we were still trying to digest that horror, we discovered the sinful cover-up by our church hierarchy. Many left the pews, especially our future generations.



I believe that the Holy Spirit interceded and sent us a spiritual leader who truly knew who Jesus was and followed him, Pope Francis. Apparently, that threatened too many princes of the church. Now we have two-thirds of our U.S. bishops who don't follow Francis. That's incredible and unacceptable!

The sad issue with Cardinal Robert Sarah claiming he had the support of the pope emeritus has nothing to do with "celibacy" or being "emeritus." It's always about power. I am convinced this is just another example of a senior cleric who doesn't support Francis. Please God, help save us from our own leaders.

STAN FITZGERALD

San Jose, California

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I have read the article by Massimo Faggioli, "The myth of the self-regulating institution of 'pope emeritus.' " I knew that it would only be a matter of time before Pope Benedict XVI would insert his own thoughts on important church issues as his recent book supporting priestly celibacy. Having resigned, Benedict's status should have been reduced to being a cardinal and wearing its red robes.

Even more importantly, Benedict should have been given a "ministry of prayer" for the church and told to keep his opinions to himself that may differ from the present Pope Francis.

This odd development as a pope resigning is not good for the church. It is causing division in the church, instead of unity and it undermines Francis.

JOSEPH GENTILINI

Hilliard, Ohio

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My one thought about the article and book that retired Pope Benedict XVI may have had his fingerprint on is that he, and those who disagree with Pope Francis, ought to be very thankful for Francis' approach.

Had these individuals written such article during Pope John Paul II or Benedict's time, they would have been silenced. You either followed their line or kept your mouth shut!

Francis has been very willing to allow the discussion which is far more admirable that his two predecessors.

Regarding celibacy, it still amazes me that a process for priests returning to active ministry who resigned is never discussed. Married men can be ordained Roman Catholic priests (just have to be non-Catholic before that) but married Catholics cannot be priests. When will the hierarchy not realize that the more they speak of

"celibacy" that they are making exceptions to it? Just goes to show how out of touch with reality many in the hierarchy are.

JIM OFFENBERGER

Vienna, West Virginia

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The active pope should be seen and heard. Retired or renounced former pope(s) may be seen but should not be "publicly" heard speaking or writing on matters of faith.

My thoughts as a lay Catholic.

GARY RICARDS

Peachtree City, Georgia

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I wish only to point out that Uniate priests (priests serving in Eastern Rite Roman Catholic communities united with Rome in Ukraine, Romania, Moldova and Lebanon) have been free to marry since around 1700, but only prior to ordination.

I am certain Pope Francis and Pope Benedict XVI are both well aware of this apparent anomaly in the heart of Europe and can explain how it came about.

INDREI RATIU

Transylvania, Romania

***

I am a former priest of the Columbus, Ohio, Diocese where I served for 10 years in the 1960s. I became a married man in May 1970 and fathered two children and have never regretted my decision to leave.

During my ministry in the diocese, I remained faithful to my vows and although I soon married after leaving, my motivation was not primarily to pursue marriage, but

I was becoming more and more aware that not everything was correct in the teachings of the church, and so I decided to research into the why of this confusion and told my bishop goodbye.

There is considerable evidence coming forth that the early church misconstrued the words and mission of Christ, plus omitting his core teachings — the result being a megalith of doctrine out of sync with the words preached by the teacher from Galilee 2,000 years ago. This is what I sensed after 10 years of ministry and the principal motivation for me leaving.

Regarding the comments of Pope Benedict XVI on priestly celibacy, his words will soon become more obsolete and meaningless in the minds of most people while Pope Francis will be recognized as a valuable bridge for humanity to walk into this new age of Enlightenment.

I urge you to give a deaf ear to anyone who might try to suppress these many sources of new revelation under a supposed authority. It's time for man to begin to really think for himself, to face the many polarities in our world, and to step forward as the free and enlightened being that he is.

CHARLES BENEDETTI

Lincolnshire, Illinois

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Having lived all my 75 years in faith communities, I cannot imagine my church experience without the Eucharist. Yes, all of it: nourishment, silence (or is it wordlessness) in the presence of the divine, the physical taste of the elements offered and much more.

Then there are the lesser bits. You know, reservation in a special vessel, tintinnabulate, a grand or simple monstrance, the fragrance of incense and those very human acts of genuflections, signing oneself with the cross, the procession to the altar, a head bowed and mumbled prayers learned from grandmothers and the good sisters in our youngest years. And of course, preeminently and primarily, the sharing of wine and bread over which we have prayed in that most public of prayers, the Mass.

Who are we who have such a treasure to load more burdens onto those who would share all that with those in remote places, whether in the vastness of the Amazon basin or in overcrowded cities or anywhere else? With baptism comes a right to Eucharist. Blessed be those who make it happen.

ROBERT ZAHRT

Fort Wayne, Indiana

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When I was a parishioner at St. Elizabeth Ann Seaton Catholic Church in Keller, Texas, our pastor was a married former Anglican priest. Another priest who celebrated Mass on occasion was also a married former Anglican priest.

For some time now, American bishops have been allowed to ordain married men to the priesthood if they have served as priests in the Anglican or Lutheran church. Anglican and Lutheran priests are laymen in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Their ordination is not the same as the ordination of a Catholic or Orthodox priest.

To my mind, this is blatant racism. American bishops have been ordaining white married men to the priesthood, to serve their needs, but ordaining brown skinned Amazonian men of "proven virtue" is controversial.

ANSELM SEQUEIRA

St. Thomas, Virgin Islands

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I would hope that former Pope Benedict XVI has the right to say or write what he thinks. He is no longer operating from an ex-cathedra position, rather from an informed opinion. And in this book, he is offering his opinion, not a dictum or edict.

However, Pope Francis, who is the pope, is listening to his bishops and priests and, primarily, to the needs of the people. The "practice" of celibacy is not the "way, the truth or the life." If there are no priests, whether in a region or area, what, then is the most vital issue of the people who are there? I submit it is the presence of Christ and the opportunity to receive the Eucharist.

The practice of celibacy does nothing to improve the right to receive Christ in the Eucharist. The practice of celibacy does nothing to assure the men who are priests are in fact celibate.

What is essential, vital and important is whether the people can receive Jesus in the Eucharist. If that need can only be satisfied by someone other than a celibate male, then the debate is over: give the people what they need for their souls, not what they need for their theological debates.

DAVID MURRAY

Cedarville, Michigan

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I am beyond apoplectic! This book is perhaps not surprising coming from Cardinal Robert Sarah and would certainly not have received any attention without the collaboration of Pope Benedict XVI.

But what was he thinking? Or was he thinking?

Doesn't Pope Francis have enough trouble making reforms that Benedict couldn't face? Have either the cardinal or former pope spoken up about clerical sexual abuse? This is especially true of Benedict who may well have a guilty conscience on

the subject because of his handling of some very prominent clergy accused of (and in at least one case, prosecuted for) sexual abuse.

MARGARET DUNLEAVEY

Fishkill, New York

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Unsurprisingly, many have bombarded Cardinal Robert Sarah for his seeming conservativeness displayed in his coauthored book with Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, but spared not the ex-pontiff too, especially when he had already opined to remain at the backstage.

But the ex-pontiff rightly argues in the released excerpts "I cannot keep silent!" Will a right conscience not disallow him to keep mute on a pertinent ecclesiastical issue like this? The church is made of 24 sui iuris churches. Among them, the Latin church uniquely upholds celibacy as a prerequisite to the priesthood. This shouldn't be confused with imposition because priestly candidates have other 23 churches to choose from. The only challenge is that some regions know of only churches like the Latin church.

But that will be no excuse to fight the church's uniqueness in diversity. After all, the seed of vocations are watered and nursed through immediate existing materials, and also, candidates have prior knowledge of the discipline of celibacy as understood and upheld in the Latin church before they freely decide to embrace.

What the church should work at in my understanding is to help acknowledge, revive and spread the other 23 sui iuris churches, by avoiding the temptation to misconceive the church as the Latin church. The people then, through the existing structures, like episcopal conferences, can decide on what to go for.

Pope Benedict XVI's voice may be influential, but consultative so don't mute his rich voice! The decision lies with the one pope to decide.

(Fr). ATTA OKYERE SAMUEL

Rome, Italy

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Your headline was tabloid, and, with whatever tone the emeritus pope uses, the disagreement is wonderful, and, in my view, a creative appearance of the Holy Spirit showing that disagreement is beneficial to the church.

The imperial mode displays a taste of democracy (or actually something akin to the discussions that occur in democracies) in the disagreement of "near" equals in cultural status, and I for one am pleased to see healthy arguments raised on the issues — arguments that others can take up civilly and reach a common ground for the future.

A different headline would have suggested more charity than this one.

JORIS JOHN HEISE

Bloomington, Illinois

Advertisement

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I cannot find any reference in canon law that permits the role or existence of a "pope emeritus." The former pope should have reverted to being a silent, retired cardinal (moving out of Vatican City, perhaps back to Germany) when he abandoned the papacy.

We only have one pope. His name is Pope Francis. Something is wrong when the former pope makes public appearances dressed as a pope alongside Francis. If Francis retired from the papacy, would we then have two popes emeritus?

The former pope's behavior is confusing to the faithful and very divisive, almost like an anti-pope. Causing disunity in the church is sinful.

In terms of married priests, the former pope seems to have forgotten the existence of former Episcopal priests (who are married with families) that he permitted to be ordained as Catholic priests. He also seems to have forgotten that the Eastern rites of the Catholic Church have priests who are married with families. His incoherent new book fails to acknowledge the existence of any married Catholic priests.

Clerical celibacy in the Latin Rite is mandatory now, but priests were married in the early church. Clerical celibacy is not of dominical origin. If we have married clergy (who were former Episcopalians) and married Eastern rite priests, why can't a small amount of married men in the Amazon be ordained to ensure the availability of the Eucharist and other sacraments to the faithful?

MARK FRIESLAND

Los Angeles, California

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Here is an old Roman saying (anon.) you can rely on: Summa sedes non capit duos — the supreme seat has no room for two.

(Fr.) AUGUSTINE H. SERAFINI

Oshkosh, Wisconsin

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First of all, in his final days it was reported that Pope John Paul II was more the titular head of the church, but that it was really being run by those under him.

Pope Benedict XVI is 93 years old. What person his age can clearly take the stand and speak out on the celibacy issue as he purportedly has? Or, is the real issue others in the Vatican who are pursuing the issue using his name?

ROBERT MARZULLO

Shoreline, Washington

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While I've not read the book, the pre-press has me wondering how married clergy of any tradition feel they are being minimized.

But more so, the married priests of the Roman Catholic Church may feel that their service as clergy is less productive than that of non-married cleric. How insulted and alienated they, their wives and families might feel!

(Fr.) MICHAEL A. BOCCACCIO

Stratford, Connecticut

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Last year, I read an article by Cardinal Robert Sarah on his desire for a more Eucharistic-centered church. While reading the article, my first thought was on the lack of priests to provide the Eucharist, whether it be in the Amazon, Africa, or the United States and Europe.

Maybe what is needed is not married priests, but female priests. Quite frankly, by the time the church gets this figured out, it will be too late. The intransigence of the church shows that they are inadvertently solving the priest crisis by emptying the pews.

Recently, my diocesan paper carried a column by Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron, in which he complained about the treatment of Pope Benedict XVI in the Netflix movie "The Two Popes." He said he did not believe that Benedict wanted to be pope. The current controversy would seem to show that to not be true.

THOMAS HOVEL

McFarland, Wisconsin

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Jamie Manson's excellent column alludes to the current uproar over priestly celibacy and the former pope's role in a book defending that celibate tradition, in apparent reaction to the news that our actual pope might be considering approval for married priests who could say Mass for fellow Catholics in remote, impoverished areas.

We do need to stop discussing priestly celibacy as though it has been an absolute principle up to the present day. We already have some married priests in Eastern rites, and we have married, serving priests who were formerly ordained and married while serving as clergy in other denominations. If those exceptions have already been made, why is even the most conservative Catholic horrified at the thought of married priests in the Amazon?

In my own parish in Bellingham, Washington, a few years ago, our pastor introduced us to a new priest, and his wife, before Sunday Mass. (He was a converted former Lutheran pastor.) An elderly woman in the pew behind me asked her daughter, "They let priests get married now?" She wasn't offended — just surprised. So was I. Up to that point, I had no idea that such things were allowed. Let's get the word out. Maybe that will make it easier for Pope Francis to do the sensible thing now.

JOHN STARK

Bellingham, Washington

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