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A white man with a buzz cut wears glasses, a clerical collar and a pectoral cross

Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta attends a news conference at the Vatican in this Oct. 8, 2018, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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The Catholic Church should revise its celibacy requirement for Latin-rite priests, a senior official in the Vatican's doctrinal office said.

"If it were up to me, I would revise the requirement that priest(s) have to be celibate," said Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta, adjunct secretary of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, in an interview with the Times of Malta released Jan. 7. "Experience has shown me this is something we need to seriously think about."

The archbishop said that the phenomenon of Catholic priests engaging in hidden, long-term sentimental relationships -- something he said "happens everywhere" -- is a "symptom" of priests "having to cope with" their celibacy requirement. He acknowledged that some priests father children in Malta and elsewhere. "We're talking about priests around the world, so I think it happens in Malta as well," he said.

A man who feels called to the priesthood, "may mature, enter in relationships, love a woman, love another person, and they have to make a choice," he said. "Right now, they have to make a choice."

The interview was conducted in Maltese, but the Times of Malta provided an English translation of his remarks in its story and in subtitles on the video clip it released.

Scicluna said the Latin-rite church "should learn from the Catholic churches of the Oriental rite," which have a tradition of married priests.

In many of the 23 Eastern Catholic churches, men are allowed to get married prior to being ordained but cannot become bishops.

Celibacy, Scicluna said, "was optional for the first millennium of the church's existence, and it should become optional again."

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The First Lateran Council in the 12th century forbade marriage for Latin-rite Catholic priests, deacons and subdeacons. Beginning in 1951, Pope Pius XII gave special permissions for Lutheran ministers who converted to Catholicism to be ordained priests as married men, beginning a normalization of former Protestant clergy becoming married Latin-rite Catholic priests.

Scicluna said that the church has "lost many great priests because they chose marriage."

"Why should we lose a young man who would have made a fine priest just because he wanted to get married?" he asked.

While the archbishop said he speaks openly of his position on priestly celibacy around the Vatican, he added that "the decision doesn't depend on me."

But he told the interviewer that it was the first time he was discussing his position on priestly celibacy publicly and he knew his comments would "sound heretical to some people."

While he insisted "there is a place for celibacy in the church," he said priests should have the option of remaining celibate or getting married just as in Eastern Catholic churches.

Scicluna has led the archdiocese of Malta since 2015 and was appointed adjunct secretary of the Vatican's doctrinal office in 2018; he continues to hold both positions. He was promoter of justice at the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, handling accusations of clerical sex abuse from 2002 to 2012.

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 19-Feb 1, 2024** print issue under the headline: Vatican doctrine official says celibacy should be optional for Catholic priests.