Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Francis is accompanied by Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta as he greets the crowd before celebrating Mass at the Granaries in Floriana, Malta, April 3, 2022. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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"God help the poor women who marry one of them!"

That was the initial reaction many of us entertained to the news that Archbishop Charles Scicluna, adjunct secretary of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, had called for celibacy to become optional for Latin-rite priests. It speaks to the experience many laypeople have of clergy who lack the je ne sais quoi needed to make a marriage work.

Some people naughtily suggested that not many clergy they know would be rushing to get married, but those newly permitted nonliturgical blessings are another matter.

In all seriousness, changing the church's discipline on celibacy is both easier and harder than other proposed changes to the structures of the church's ministry. For example, no doctrinal change must be undertaken to allow priests to marry.

In order to ordain women to the priesthood, there would need to be a change of doctrine because St. Pope John Paul II explicitly decreed in the 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdatolis* "that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful." That is a big hurdle to overcome, albeit one that has no bearing on the discussion of ordaining women to the diaconate.

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Not only was celibacy not the rule in the Western church for the first millennium, it is still not the rule for Eastern-rite churches, both those in communion with Rome and those that are not. I remember one of the first times a friend of mine said, "Yeah, I'm

a priest's kid," and I was taken aback for a split second until I remembered that he was Greek Orthodox.

A 1,000-year-long tradition is nothing to shake a stick at, to be sure, but it is not indelible either.

N.B. Last month, I called attention to an important essay by University of Notre Dame theologian John Cavadini, and his concern that the synod's synthesis document leaned toward a conception of priesthood rooted in baptism more than ordination, as churches in the Reformed Protestant tradition do. It will be interesting to look at that discussion through the experience of married Eastern-rite clergy.

The practical difficulties with ending mandatory celibacy are many. Currently, a parish must pay its pastor, but if he were married, the parish would need to be able to pay him enough to support a family, far more than priests get paid now. And, human nature being what it is, if a priest runs off with someone else, would not the parish and/or the diocese have an obligation to the family he left behind?

Large parishes often have a pastor and one or more curates. Finding arrangements that work for both pastor and curate give vicars for clergy headaches as it is. Trying to match whole families would seem like an impossibility.

Allowing married priests would also necessarily introduce a two-tier system within each presbyterate. If we were to follow the lead of our Eastern-rite churches, only celibate men could become bishops, so unmarried priests would be on a different career track from married clergy.



Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican foreign minister, center, speaks with Metropolitan Elias Kfoury, representing Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X, Feb. 2, 2022, as they attend the monthly meeting of the Maronite Catholic bishops at Bkerke, the Maronite patriarchate, near Beirut. At left is Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite Catholic patriarch. (CNS/Mychel Akl for Maronite patriarchate)

Different tracks produce tensions, which can be managed to be sure, but will add to the challenges of unifying a presbyterate around substantial diocesan goals.

One of the principle, practical considerations for enacting celibacy in the Middle Ages might no longer exist: nepotism.

In preindustrial societies, the son of the butcher became a butcher and the son of the farmer became a farmer. (Almost all were serfs of some sort, but that is a different story.) What happens to our Catholic understanding of sacramental vocation, however, when the son of the priest is expected to become a priest? And if parishes were passed down from one pastor to his son and then to the grandson, the line between what the church owned and did became blurred with what the

O'Connell clan or the Ferullo *famiglia* owned and did.

Nowadays, the son of a mailman can become the cardinal-archbishop of Chicago, so the concern with pastorates being handed down from one generation to another within the same family probably doesn't exist.

Scicluna made clear that he was not motivated to call for ending mandatory celibacy because of the lack of vocations. Malta has plenty of priests. He came to the conclusion because of what he perceives as the unnecessary laicization of men from the ranks of the clergy because they fall in love. The lack of vocations, however, is a serious issue.

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During the Amazon synod, the case was made based on the fact that many Catholics in that region could only partake in the Eucharist episodically because of the dearth of clergy.

I would not say that Catholics have a "right" to the Eucharist because rights language never fits neatly with Catholic ecclesiology. But I would say that when large numbers of people have infrequent access to the sacrament that is the source of our Catholic faith, we should move earth, if not heaven, to find ways to rectify that fact.

Change, in the church or in the world, always brings unintended consequences. That fact is no impediment to embracing change. Foreseeable consequences, intended or not, must be reckoned with.

A married clergy would certainly force the church to confront the fact that the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* against artificial birth control has not been received in large parts of the Catholic Church. It is one thing for celibate clergy to look out from the pulpit and notice there are very few families with seven or eight children. It is quite another for the assembled congregation to look up at the pulpit and see a married priest with only two kids.

Raising the issue of mandatory celibacy is fine, but like the issue of providing blessings to same-sex couples and others in irregular marital situations, it delays what is the more important reckoning the church must make, namely, reassessing the role of women. That is the issue on which the church most desperately needs to

see progress.