The pluses and minuses of married priests

Bill Tammeus  |  Jul. 10, 2017  A small c catholic

Ten or 12 years ago, I wrote a feature story for The Kansas City Star about a married Catholic priest in southeast Kansas.

He was, as no doubt you've already guessed, a convert from the Episcopal Church, which he had served as a priest.

He was also conflicted. He loved his wife and loved the Catholic Church. He said he felt married to both, but that divided loyalty wasn't easy. Indeed, he told me that if he had been a Catholic official with the authority to approve his request to convert to Catholicism and become a priest, he might well have said no.

All of that came to mind recently as I read the [NCR story from Dublin](https://www.ncronline.org) [1] about the retired bishop of Portsmouth, England, saying that the ordination of married men to the priesthood "needs to be explored openly within the church in England and Wales at national and diocesan levels." Heck, I think it should be discussed throughout the church universal.

I come from a branch of Christianity that allows married men to be ordained as pastors (and one that, since 1956, has [ordained women](https://www.ncronline.org) [2], who also may be married). Has this tradition of married clergy been nothing but wonderful for the [Presbyterian Church (USA)](https://www.ncronline.org) [3]? No. But on the whole, it's served us well.

So it might be helpful for Catholics to know a bit about our experience as they ponder adopting (or, more accurately, re-adopting) the practice of having married priests. Here, then, is what I think has worked:

- When our married pastors ? male or female ? do premarital or marriage counseling, they can draw on their personal experience, including times they've needed outside help to resolve issues. This often is reassuring to those being counseled.
- Most of our married pastors understand the trials and joys of parenthood because they are parents. Parents seeking pastoral counseling understand that the person trying to help them walks in their shoes. And as parents, our pastors often are nicely in tune with how to structure educational and fellowship programs for children of various ages.
- Married pastors tend to have a built-in support system in their family. This can be a plus and a minus. Sometimes they don't realize they need outside professional counseling that their families are unequipped to give. But mostly families are a source of love and support for pastors.
- In the early years after being ordained, married pastors can and often do rely on their spouses to help them sort through problems at church and to love and hold them when that's especially what they need. And in retirement, having a spouse with whom to share that sometimes-difficult transition often is a blessing.

There's more, but here is some of what can be problematic about having married clergy:

- As the married Kansas priest about whom I wrote suggested, being married means sometimes feeling a difficult pull away from church work. And yet I've found that pastors who are more committed to their
ministry than they are to their spouse make neither good pastors nor good husbands or wives.

- Sexual temptation doesn't go away for either married pastors or celibate priests. And this can damage a congregation. Indeed, it happened in my own congregation and my own life when my first wife had an affair with our pastor, eventually causing him to leave, ending my marriage and creating a scandal in our church.
- Married clergy are simply not as available as single pastors for some aspects of church life. In my congregation, we know that our single associate pastor—a female not yet 30 years old—is more likely to accept a lunch or dinner invitation than is our senior pastor, a 49-year-old married man with three children and a wife with a legal career.

In the end, I'd much rather that ordained people have the option of marriage. It blesses far more than it curses the church.

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