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The elephant in the room at Catholic University

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NCR Today

I was honored to be present for the First Annual Dean Hoge Memorial Lecture at Catholic University on March 24. It was delivered by Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., vice-president of the U.S. bishops' conference. Jerry Filteau's account of that evening provides a good summary of what he said.

I want to talk about what he did *not* say. I knew Dean Hoge when he headed the Life Cycle Institute and discussed his ongoing research interests with him on occasion. He focused much of his work on Catholic priests, but one of his major concerns was mandatory celibacy for priests. Yet Bishop Kicanas omitted that issue in his address. It's not hard to figure out why he omitted it. It's a "hot button" issue, and the Vatican shows no sign of wanting to change the rules. Bishops like Kicanas probably don't want to raise any eyebrows in the Vatican.

But this unwillingness of the hierarchy to even talk about such issues is one of the major ongoing problems of the institutional Catholic church. Mandatory clerical celibacy relates directly to the shortage of priests and the vast majority of the laity favor a change. It is surely implicated in some of the problems and pressures faced by Catholic clergy. Yet even moderate bishops like Kicanas omit it from their public statements.

I look at the other denominations I cover frequently on *Interfaith Voices*, especially in mainstream Protestantism. Clergy and laity wrestle with issues publicly, and sometimes it's messy. But for those of us who value dialogue, it is healthy and positive -- even in the Episcopal church, where it gets really messy.

We need some Catholic bishops to encourage public discussion of contentious issues. And oh yes, while we're talking about priesthood? that includes the ordination of women.

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