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## Trouble with celibacy in the church in Africa

by Pat Perriello

NCR Today

I have to admit I was surprised to see this Religion News Service article about schismatic priests in Africa.

I don't know much about the church in Africa, but considering a few months ago we were talking seriously about the possibility of an African pope, it is worth exploring. Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana was one African candidate mentioned at the time as a possible replacement for Pope Benedict. We were also led to believe that the African church was a thriving, fast-growing community that bode well for the future of the universal church.

Now we learn of an extensive resistance to celibacy within the African church. We read about an African bishop who left the church to marry and subsequently provided leadership for many other priests who chose to marry. Many of us may remember Zambian Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo getting married several years ago in a Unification Church ceremony. Yet the entire incident generally seemed to be a somewhat strange aberration.

Milingo left the church and became a leader of others wishing to serve God as married priests. We now learn that large numbers of priests feel celibacy is simply incompatible with African culture. Finally, we read that there are as many as 300,000 African Catholics following these schismatic married priests and their archbishop. Such a large group cannot be ignored as somehow inconsequential. To carry it one step further, there are those who are saying that if the truth were known, the actual situation of the African church would be even more startling.

Africa is not alone in its difficulty with celibacy. One need not spend a great deal of time pursuing the unflattering history of celibacy within the church to know there are problems. Stories of failures to live celibate lives abound in almost every culture. Why is it OK to ignore such realities or simply chalk them up to the weakness and sinfulness of individuals? Eventually, that approach didn't work very well in the

sex abuse crisis.

How long can the church continue with the fiction that forced celibacy is a viable option for all priests? How extensive must the failure of celibacy be shown to be before the church recognizes that it is not such a good idea?

It is time to begin a serious review of church discipline throughout the world, beginning with mandatory celibacy. Regional experiments with expanding opportunities for married clergy should begin almost immediately. It needs to be on Pope Francis' agenda.

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