

DEAR DEACON BULLETIN INSERT

❖ **Dear Deacon Jim,**

Is there any plan to gain more priests? It does not seem to be a priority. It seems like nothing is changing. Why can't we allow priests to be married? Why can't we welcome women into the priesthood? And why can't the seminary/schooling time be lessened so we can get priests to the altar sooner? It seems there are more reactive measures, like merging and closing churches, than proactive measures.

❖ **Response**

Certainly, the Church has been experiencing a decline over the last two decades in the number of priests ordained to the ministerial priesthood. Unfortunately, there has also been a decline in the number of lay faithful Catholics which in part has contributed to this decline.

I can speak directly to the various priorities and initiatives that have been taken in our Diocese Of Scranton. The current pastoral planning initiatives, under the leadership of Bishop Joseph C. Bambera, officially commenced in the year 2019. This blueprint process has as its goal proactively recognizing the challenges in our church not only presently but over the next ten years and hopefully beyond. Such challenges considered include the changing demographics, fewer people in our parishes, and yes, the diminishing number of ordained priests. A document entitled “*Vision 2030: Creating Parishes Communities Rooted in the Life of Jesus Christ*” was released that provides these challenges in more detail.

Actions from this process are being taken throughout our diocese to address these many challenges. Some of which may not be immediately evident or are unknown by all the lay faithful. These include: Dedicated Vocations Director is now assisted by Five (5) additional priests throughout our diocese, increased recruitment programs and activities by the Vocations Director and Parish Life Office, recruitment to the priesthood of individuals not only in high school but from professional life who meet the criteria as well, arrangements for use of international priests (currently there are 14 priests from other countries serving in our Diocese). Additionally, there has been an increase in the number of Permanent Deacons, who assist and lighten the load of our active priests.

Other initiatives such as utilizing the Parish Life Coordinator (PLC) model where that person (layperson or Deacon) administers the parish functions freeing up the priest to serve the spiritual needs have and are being implemented. A greater emphasis is being placed on the involvement of the lay faithful to participate in the various ministries of their parish life and applicable programs offered by the Office Of Parish Life.

These are some of the proactive measures that are being taken to deal with the many challenges our local Church is confronted with today. It is my understanding that many of these initiatives may be evaluated in other dioceses in our country as well.

Regarding the question “*Why can't we allow priests to be married*” that is a fair question considering today's challenges. There is a long-standing practice for priests not to marry and require celibacy in the Latin-Roman rite. Unlike the doctrines of the Church, which are the actual teachings handed down by Jesus and His Apostles and cannot change, priestly

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celibacy falls under the category of discipline in the Latin Church. Disciplines are teachings or guidelines put in place by the Church through her good judgment and by the authority given to her by Jesus Himself to "bind" her teachings "on Earth" (*cf Mat 16:19 and Matthew 18:17-18*). They are given for the pastoral good of the faithful, and are not "optional", but must be faithfully observed.

In Matthew 19:12, Jesus recommends celibacy to those who can accept it: *"Some are incapable of marriage because.... they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it."*

There are some practical considerations as well. I am sure if you asked any married clergy whether it is difficult to have two "families", his natural family, and his congregation. Many would admit that it is tough, and their time and loyalties can be torn. *"I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife",* (1 Corinthians 7:32-33).

Concerning *welcoming women into the priesthood* some argue that the Church should allow this. However, this argument does not hold much ground. Because while Jesus did choose married men among his Apostles, he did not choose women. There is also the fact that in Mass, the priest takes the place of Jesus in the ritual of the Last Supper, the Eucharist. Jesus was himself a man. For this reason, a woman cannot represent Jesus.

However, it should be recognized that since the days of Vatican II, the role of women in the Church has overwhelmingly increased, not only in participating in the various ministries, but also in holding key leadership roles, not only locally, but in the Holy See.

Regarding lessening the amount of time in the seminary for priests to be ordained sooner - that is an interesting concept. However, I feel it would have an overall negative impact. The current amount of time required in the seminary for priestly formation provides not only for critical theological and academic studies (such as various pre-theology, philosophy disciplines, etc.), prayerful discernment, and apostolic works. These elements are an essential part of the individual's spiritual direction and pastoral preparation. I recall a phrase frequently used: "quality must not be sacrificed for quantity." I believe if we shorten the length of time for our priestly formation in the seminary that the quality of those shepherding the Lord's flock would surely be compromised. I am not aware of any discussions to lessen the amount of time to provide ordained priests to the altar sooner than the current standard.

We must all pray and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to be with and guide us and together work to maintain our Church strong and vibrant for all the faithful during these challenging times

Deacon Jim