

5-31-08 - CELIBACY: It's the reason fewer men want to be priests, author says  
By Nicole Neroulias, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE, Winston-Salem Journal (NC)

During his recent trip to America, Pope Benedict XVI attended a youth rally at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y. -- the same school where enrollment has dwindled to the point that no new prospective priests are enrolled next fall.

As the U.S. church ordains its crop of about 400 new priests in the coming weeks, church leaders hope that Benedict's words of encouragement will inspire more men to consider the priesthood.

The Rev. Donald Cozzens of John Carroll University, however, says that it will take a major change in Vatican policy on celibacy to revitalize the priesthood.

Cozzens, 69, has tracked the decline in vocations for more than 10 years, including as rector of Cleveland's St. Mary Seminary from 1995 to 2000. In his 2006 book, *Freeing Celibacy*, and in lectures all over the country, he argues that celibacy should be optional for Catholic priests.

(Some answers have been edited for length or clarity.)

Q. What do you see as the reason for the decline in American men wanting to become priests?

A. The clergy sexual-abuse scandals have taken their toll, but my hunch is that the typical size of the Catholic family is a major factor. Catholics on average are having about two children. And so, the replacement rate in the United States today -- for every 100 priests who either retire or die or leave ministry -- we're ordaining, I believe, fewer than 35.

Q. But you also argue that mandating celibacy for priests is a significant part of this problem?

A. I think celibacy is a great gift, and it's wonderful for people who have the grace and the gift and the calling, but it can be a very difficult situation for men who feel called to the priesthood but not to celibacy. Over the past half dozen years, I've asked probably two dozen men if they've ever thought of being priests, and every one of them has said yes, they have thought of it, but then they add, "I really feel also called to the sacrament of marriage, I'd like to be a husband and a father."

Q. When did you start thinking mandatory celibacy should be reconsidered?

A. The first time I thought about the priesthood, from my grade-school days, I felt called to be a priest, and the issue of mandatory celibacy was a disquieting condition of the priesthood. But I didn't seriously look at the history of celibacy and its theology until after I was ordained. We've always had a married priesthood in the Catholic church. It really wasn't until the 12th century that celibacy was made mandatory for diocesan

priests, and some historians argue that it really wasn't taken seriously until the 16th century.

Q. Given that there are some married clergy now in the Eastern rite churches or who have converted to Catholicism, what's stopping the Vatican from deciding to allow married priests in general?

A. That's a good question. Celibacy is a church policy, it is not a church dogma. Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI, they have the freedom to change that policy at any time they feel it would be prudent to do so. There are a number of bishops' conferences who have called upon the Vatican to reflect and discuss the issue of celibacy and whether or not is it wise to legislate celibacy for every person who feels called to the priesthood.

Q. Will this policy change within your lifetime?

A. We need to provide the Eucharist to Catholic people, and if the trend continues I think the demographic situation might bring about a change in this policy. But, we'd have to hit a critical pastoral need and we'd need leadership from the U.S. bishops and we'd also need the laity and the clergy to say, "Let's examine this policy. Is it really necessary and good for the church?"

Q. What about other strategies for increasing seminary enrollment? For example, do you think the pope's visit might inspire more men to consider the priesthood?

A. I wouldn't be surprised if there was an increase in the number of men applying to our seminaries, but I don't believe it will be significant enough to meet the challenges that the U.S. Catholic church will be facing, in terms of the number of ordained priests available for ministry.

Q. If the Vatican decides that priests don't have to be celibate anymore, would you get married?

A. Not at my age. I think it's possible to grow into the gift of celibacy. I would have to discern whether or not I was being called to marriage just as I had to discern whether I was being called to the priesthood.