

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Amazon Synod that met in Rome last month focused on evangelization and the environment - how to bring the gospel to people in remote areas, and how to protect them from ecological harm. But the part of the synod that got the media's attention was the proposal about ordaining some married men as Catholic priests. It appeared in the working document paragraph 129 a) 2: "Affirming that celibacy is a gift for the Church, it is requested that, for the most remote areas of the region, the possibility of priestly ordination be studied for older people, preferably indigenous, respected and accepted by their community, even if they have an existing and stable family, in order to ensure availability of the Sacraments that accompany and sustain the Christian life." The participating bishops voted 128 to 41 in favor of that study. That does not mean a change will happen, though it could. And if celibacy becomes optional for priests in the Amazon, that does not mean it becomes optional for priests in Missouri.

Pope St. Paul VI wrote an encyclical on priestly celibacy in 1967, just a few years after the close of the Second Vatican Council when many people thought that priests throughout the church would be allowed to marry. Instead, Paul VI kept the tradition with arguments from history, theology and pastoral care. One argument cited a verse from Matthew's gospel that has a parallel in the passage we heard today from Luke: "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." The encyclical states that celibacy "stands as a testimony to the ever-continuing progress of the People of God toward the final goal of their earthly pilgrimage, and as a stimulus for all to raise their eyes to the things above, 'where Christ is seated at the right hand of God' and where 'our life is hid with Christ in God' until it appears 'with him in glory.'"

Basically, Jesus' argument is that once you are dead, you can no longer die; therefore, in the resurrection, there is no need for sexual reproduction to continue the species; that pertains to this life. Paul VI's argument is that celibacy therefore foreshadows heaven where reproduction is unnecessary; it lifts people's minds to bigger purposes.

That said, priestly celibacy has been a discipline in the Roman Church only since the twelfth century, not from the beginning, and most Eastern Churches never required it. At least seven early popes were married, including Pope Hormisdas in the sixth century, whose son Silverius also became pope, and both of them are saints. Today a Lutheran or Episcopal priest joining the Catholic Church may apply for priesthood even if he is married. We have at least four such priests working in our diocese today. The desire in the Amazon is to make the sacraments more broadly available. We await further news from Pope Francis.

The Sadducees tried to trap Jesus into agreeing that resurrection made no sense, but he turned the trap. God is the God of the living; even the dead are alive to him. Because of this gospel that reaffirms the resurrection and the appeal from the Amazon Synod to protect the environment, we should all evaluate our lives. Whether we are single or married, our obsessions over physical and sensual matters veil our view of the resurrection. They make us live for the moment, not for eternity. They make us live for ourselves, not for others. Faith impels us to live without those distractions that keep us even now from the glory of God.

Sunday, November 10, 2019