

Australian bishops can't shy away from celibacy questions

The Universal Church's own history bears out the fact that priestly celibacy is not mandatory

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Pope Francis greets Benedict XVI prior the opening of the the Holy Door of Saint Peter's Basilica, formally starting the Jubilee of Mercy, at the Vatican City, Dec. 8, 2015. (Photo by MAURIZIO BRAMBATTI/EPA/Newscom/MaxPPP).

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By a seemingly providential quirk, the first pope's mother-in-law appeared just in time to set the record straight.

Thanks to the cycle of readings in the Catholic Church's lectionary, the Gospel of Mark's account of Jesus healing Saint Peter's mother-in-law was read from pulpits worldwide on 15 January 2020.

This was the very day after the question of priestly celibacy exploded in Rome in a quagmire of Church politics, becoming a timely reminder of facts for Australia's Catholic Community.

News that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI had co-authored a book with Cardinal Robert Sarah surprised many.

Most of all, it seems, the Pope Emeritus and those close to him. On 14 January, Benedict's private secretary clarified that Benedict did not co-author the volume and asked the publisher to remove Benedict's name from the cover.

Of course, behind the covers was a debate about sex.

This scandal-causing book argues against possible changes to the rule of mandatory celibacy for Latin-rite Catholic priests.

Its publication was rather transparently an attempt to thwart proposals coming out of the Amazonian Synod of 2019, where the idea of relaxing mandatory celibacy had been discussed.

If Sarah's intervention hoped to dampen debate, his book has of course had the opposite effect.

Australian Catholics have a particular dog in this fight. Whatever the fallout from Rome over this book, it should not be allowed to scare Australia's bishops off from discussing the subject during the Plenary Council which is opening in Australia this year.

In fact — and this is hard for a historian to say — the bishops should perhaps stop worrying about history quite so much. Habit should never trump tradition.

Debates about priestly celibacy and sexual continence are almost as old as the Catholic priesthood itself. Progressive-minded commentators will usually point out that the strict, universal rule for Latin-rite priests is of medieval European origin.

In other words, for more than a millennium, western priests could be married until — as my former hometown country priest once put it with some exaggeration but also a sprinkling of truth — 'monks became popes'.

On the other side, conservative-minded commentators tend to highlight that historic married priests were periodically discouraged from having sex until they gradually abandoned the habit of marrying in the first place, and that the last half a millennium bears witness to the ideal of sexual continence

For the record, in most of the Church's other rites there are married priests and long have been.

Rather than a clear-cut history, what the Church really has is a long-running argument about the nature of the priesthood, of which the continence and celibacy questions are a multi-millennia point of contention, and to which Sarah's book is merely one of the latest contributions.

But what history does tell us very clearly is that circumstances matter.

The main reason the Catholic Church currently has priests who are not celibate is a function of the church having multiple rites.

From the ancient Churches of the east to the Anglican Ordinaries brought into full communion by the Pope Emeritus only a few years ago, the Universal Church's own history does bear out the fact that priestly celibacy is not mandatory.

A wealth of individual exceptions are merely the icing on an already really big and ancient cake.

Whether Australia's bishops are willing to discuss seeking a local relaxation of the rule of mandatory celibacy is one of the big questions of Plenary 2020.

But if they are hesitant to broach this issue with the confidence of their Amazonian confreres, then they could at least take some inspiration from that timely reading from the Gospel of Mark.

If Jesus had had a problem with Peter having a mother-in-law, he could have let the fever take her, and later generations would have been none the wiser.

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